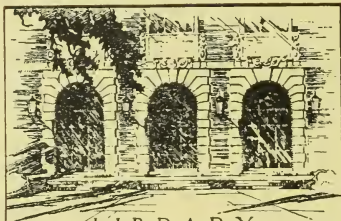


MRS BOUVERIE

F. C. Phillips



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MRS. BOUVERIE

BY

F. C. PHILIPS

AUTHOR OF "AS IN A LOOKING-GLASS," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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MRS. BOUVERIE

CHAPTER I.

SHOULD he go on the morrow, or wait two or three days? Impatience tempted him to the former course; Discretion said, "Don't show them you're in such a hurry." No, it would doubtless be foolish to go at once—he would not. "But," argued Impatience, "it is obviously your first book; you won't get any better terms for it on Saturday than you will get to-morrow morning." Frank brightened. "Unless," put in Prudence again, "your haste should lead them to conclude you are hard up—in which case they will certainly reduce their offer by half!" Frank squirmed.

Ultimately he decided to call upon Messrs. Benson on the next day but one ; and spent all his intervening leisure debating how he should dress for the occasion. His wardrobe was strictly limited, but which pattern in "trousering" looked the more soberly opulent, and whether he should wear a knot or a bow, were weighty questions under the circumstances, on which he did not scruple to ask his sisters' advice.

He had written a little note to Curzon Street the same evening, enclosing the publisher's letter, and promising a detailed account of the interview directly it was over. Now he imagined a thousand delightful and impossible conversations to report.

He designed to call on Messrs. Benson in the time allotted him for luncheon. Not that it would have been a difficult matter to secure an extra half-hour, but, by utilizing the time he was entitled to, he would avoid the necessity

of saying anything to Jessop until he could spring the news of the acceptance on him point blank. The eventful morning broke fine and clear, and when the clock struck half-past twelve, Frank caught up his hat, fished a pair of gloves out of his pocket, and, with an elaborate semblance of carelessness, strolled out of the Sub's presence.

No sooner had he closed the door behind him than the carelessness vanished, however. His face flushed, and his heart beat more quickly. There was no thought of emigrating in his mind now; he was a novelist—a novelist with an appointment at his publishers—walking along the road to fame and fortune. Beautiful London, what a fine city it was, when all had been said against it! He contemplated the crowd that passed him with appreciative eyes; everybody was interesting, everybody amused and pleased him. Novels and sonnets, articles and dramas jostled him at every step.

Who could help being a "literary gent" in London? Why, it was full, overflowing with "material." He reached the office where he was to learn his fate, and, with a thump of the heart louder than ever, so loud that it seemed to choke him, strode in.

The lordly clerk to whom he had entrusted the MS. was on a stool behind the counter, as on the previous occasion.

"Is Mr. Benson in?" said Frank. "I have an appointment with him—'Mr. Heath.'"

"Will you take a seat, sir?" answered the important personage. "Mr. Benson will be disengaged in a few minutes."

Frank took the proffered chair as nonchalantly as he could contrive to do, with a wildly abnormal pulse, and fell to pulling his moustache nervously. He wished it were bigger, and that the interview had finished. The glib sentences he had mentally rehearsed faded from his memory, and he was suddenly

and humiliatingly conscious that Mr. Benson was going to have the better of it when they came together. He decided it was already one trick to the other, that he was requested to "wait a few minutes." In those few minutes' waiting, the confidence with which he had entered was deserting him rapidly—his assurance was melting like ice at Goodwood, and suspense was robbing him of his self-possession at the very outset of the game. It is often very advantageous to keep your adversary waiting "a few minutes;" and the knowledge of the fact is not confined to the publishing fraternity.

The clerk left his stool, disappeared, and returned. The only gleam of comfort in Frank's temporary abasement of spirit was the fact that he was deferential now; the *hauteur* with which he had consented to receive the MS. was absent to-day.

"Will you step this way, sir, please?" he said.

Frank followed him up a flight of stairs. A middle-aged gentleman stood smiling beside an open desk, and advanced with extended hand.

"Mr. Heath? I am very pleased to see you," said the gentleman. "Pray sit down."

Frank sank into a morocco-covered arm-chair that was too deep in the seat to permit of him lying back in it, and which, he felt, detracted from any dignity of attitude. The gentleman appeared to expect him to say something, and he could not think of anything to say; so, at last, clearing his throat, he murmured:

"Well, Mr. Benson, I am very glad you have seen your way to consider my story."

As the other did not reply to this immediately, Frank was seized with a horrid fear that perhaps there had been a mistake after all, and turned inwardly hot.

Mr. Benson, however, was only turning over

the papers on his desk to find his Reader's report. When he had it, he smiled afresh.

"Yes," he said ; "yes, I—er—the report is really excellent. Your first essay in fiction, Mr. Heath, eh ?"

Frank admitted it.

"I am a journalist," he replied ; "but I have never tried my pen at fiction until now."

"A journalist ; indeed ?" Mr. Benson was obviously impressed, and the young man congratulated himself that the way for the announcement had been paved for him at so early a stage. Now Mr. Benson knew he was not dealing with a novice.

"Yes ; I am on the *Hyde Park*."

"The *Hyde Park* ; so ? Well, there is no training for a novelist like journalism. I have always maintained it. Gets the pen under control, and supplies some experience, doesn't it ? We get a great quantity of MSS. sent in ; I need not tell you that. This year we have

had twelve hundred and sixty odd ; and, in an alarming number, it is quite evident the writers have had no experience of the world at all. You would be astonished, perfectly astonished, Mr. Heath, if you knew how small a percentage of the MSS. we have submitted to us are of the slightest value. And of that small percentage only about a sixth are good enough to print. The crop is fined down to very narrow proportions, you see."

"And all through inexperience of the world?" inquired Frank, conscious that his own experience had its limits.

"Oh, I don't say that," said Mr. Benson, with a shrug of his shoulders; "not by any means. A very great number of the people have got the beefsteak—if I may use the simile—and don't know how to cook it. To-day, everybody thinks he can write, Mr. Heath. Fiction is no longer approached with the reverence it used to be. What do we read of our

old masters, our literary giants of the last generation or two? That they toiled and strove for years before they dared to hope to see themselves in print. You remember the anecdote of Dickens when he saw his first short story had appeared? He turned away from the crowd in Fleet Street into the Temple Gardens, and cried tears of joy and pride. After years—Dickens! And to-day every amateur writes a three-volume novel to begin with, and doesn't even dream he is presumptuous."

Frank, who was more concerned about his own work than anybody's else, wished heartily that Mr. Benson would suspend his reflections and come to the point. This, though, Mr. Benson seemed in no hurry to do.

"And another thing," he said, "while journalism is, undoubtedly, the best preparation for our male novelists, I have never observed it do much for women. It may be that more

women *dabble* in journalism than men, but we have had scores of novels submitted by women who wrote they were doing criticisms, or society paragraphs, for this, that, or the other paper, and they have been to the full as amateurish and impossible as any MS. that comes to us. No style, no characterization, no acquaintance with the most rudimentary laws of fiction. Women say that they are handicapped in the professions. They may be, but one thing is undeniably true—there are hundreds of women contributing to minor papers in England to-day, and calling themselves ‘journalists,’ whose qualifications would not enable a man to get a single paragraph accepted in five years. And they make a living by their scribbling, too. I wish they didn’t,” he added, with a humorous sigh, “for, inevitably, they all try to write a novel at some time, and we have trouble enough in weeding out the rubbish without them.”

"Yes, I can quite understand it," murmured Frank, whose impatience had risen to fever heat.

"With regard to your own story now, Mr. Heath," continued the publisher, crossing his legs, "it *has* style, and more than that, it has characterization. If anything, it is *too* introspective, but—to my own taste, at least—that is a fault on the right side. Our Reader writes—yes, 'enthusiastically' of it." (Frank would have liked to seek out that Reader and fall upon his neck.) "The report is—er—is really very favourable indeed."

"It seems very long, at all events," said Frank, burning to possess himself of the closely-covered foolscap, and devour it at his leisure. "Do you always get reports so lengthy as that one?"

"No, very seldom." Mr. Benson turned to it again, and ran his eye over a few of the lines with a smile, while Frank quivered with

curiosity. "It has impressed the Reader very strongly. Now, with respect to terms; it is short, unfortunately, very short."

"Three volumes, I think," muttered Frank.

"No, I think not; two at the most, and we always prefer to bring out a book in three volumes or in one."

"I myself like one-volume books," Frank said.

"But the public, Mr. Heath, the public are faithful to the three-volume novel in spite of everything. And so the three-volume novel remains the one which the poor publisher can afford to pay most money for. Now in one volume form—we should bind it very artistically—we propose to bring the work out, say in about a couple of months' time, and we can offer you—er—twenty-five pounds for the copy-right."

"Oh, I couldn't," said Frank, faintly; "I really couldn't!" He told the biggest lie of

his life. "I would rather the MS. dropped to pieces of natural decay than let my work go at such a price."

He was surprised to see no surprise in Mr. Benson. On the contrary, the announcement was received most equably.

"It is, unhappily, so short," repeated the publisher, musingly ; "so short."

"Well, one doesn't sell literature by the yard, you know," returned Frank, plucking up his spirit ; "a good many books that have gone into six editions have been shorter."

"With a name tacked on to them—with a well-known name, Mr. Heath! If you were a well-known man, I could offer you—" Mr. Benson spread out his hands, as signifying sums too vast for words. "Clever as your story is, and much as I appreciate it, I am bound to add that we run a considerable risk in undertaking its publication at all. The public—oh, the public!—they *will* run after

names, and ignore merit, my dear sir, and we publishers are only the wilful public's servants, when all is said and done."

Frank ruminated, and Mr. Benson assumed the regretful expression of a benevolent artist, thwarted by the Philistine in his most noble aims.

"I am really afraid I can't take twenty-five," the young man declared again, more firmly. "I think I am entitled to ask a hundred pounds for the copyright."

"I'll tell you what I will propose to my brother," replied the other, after a pause: "A cash payment of twenty-five pounds—no, hear me out," as the author vigorously shook his head—"and a certain royalty, which we can discuss later, on every copy sold, after we have exhausted the first edition. Now how does that meet your views?"

"The first edition to consist of—what?" asked Frank.

"Er, oh," murmured Mr. Benson, "say five hundred copies."

"Well, that sounds reasonable," responded Frank, rising (he would have answered just the same if a thousand had been the suggested number); "and you will write me what royalty you can offer in a day or two?"

"In a day or two. Good morning, my dear sir."

The budding novelist's hand was shaken warmly, and Mr. Benson accompanied him downstairs, and, through the office, to the doorstep. Nothing could have been more cordial or more flattering. The boy scarcely knew whether he stood on his head or his heels, and he had an agreeable sensation, too, of having obtained very fair terms. That it was to the highest degree improbable that his book would ever sell to the extent of five hundred copies he had not a suspicion, and he mentally clapped himself on the back for having "secured a

royalty in addition to the original offer." Mr. Benson, whose first intention had been to increase his terms to fifty pounds cash, and not to hold out the royalty bait at all, was very satisfied also. He saw in the book a good deal more talent than anyone else had seen as yet, but that it was the kind of thing to run into more than one edition he did not believe for a single moment.

CHAPTER II.

FRANK made a hurried meal, and went back to the office of the *Hyde Park*. But he was late, despite his haste, and Jessop commented on it.

"You've been a long time," he said ; " what have you been up to ?"

Frank glanced at the clock. " I am sorry," he answered, " but I had an appointment at Benson's, and couldn't get away any sooner."

" Benson's ?" echoed Jessop, staring.

" About my novel. They wrote that they would like to see me about it, and Mr. Benson proved loquacious."

"You mean that they have accepted it," Jessop demanded ; "that you have really placed the thing ?"

"Oh, yes," said Frank, cheerfully ; "'every-thing comes to him who knows how to wait,' you know ! Mr. Benson was kind enough to tell me that the Reader had 'reported enthusiastically' upon it—that it had 'style' and 'characterization,' and half-a-hundred virtues."

"Benson ? Himself ?"

"Benson, yes. He came down-stairs with me, and wrung my hand on the doorstep, and said he 'admired my work immensely.' He was quite affectionate and deferential !"

"*Good Lord !*" murmured the Sub ; "is all this true ?"

"True as the History of England. They are bringing it out in about two months' time, and I am to have a cheque at once, and a royalty after the first edition."

"This beats cock-fighting! I never heard anything so extraordinary in my life."

"They are going to make a special feature of it—the cover is to be a thing of beauty, and a joy for ever. Benson said 'most artistic!'"

"And he saw you down to the door, you say?"

"With *empressement*! Told me he was delighted to have made my acquaintance."

"You take the cake," declared Jessop; "it's a conundrum! So you're going to be a full-fledged literary man, and your publishers actually *believe* in you. I thought I was past being surprised, but upon my soul this would make the Sphinx gasp. Well, I'm sure I congratulate you heartily!"

Frank bent over the table, feeling that there were compensations in life after all. Jessop's amazement was worth another twenty-five pounds to the tyro whose ambitions he had snubbed.

But the girls, how delighted they were!

How the colour leapt up into their faces as the news was told ! Christabel danced about the room with excitement, and Marion's voice shook as she murmured her rapture and felicitations :—

“Dear boy,” she said, kissing him ; “please God this is the beginning of a new life for you—the turning-point in your career. Chrissie and I will go to the news-room every day when the book is published, and look out for your reviews. How happy you ought to be, how happy and proud, after an opinion like that from such a man !”

Both girls had promised to give little Miss Stirling their assistance that night at a concert which was to be held to obtain funds for the establishment of a local *crèche*, and, though they were now reluctant to go out, they could not disappoint her. Frank, moreover, insisted that he should not be dull, for he would, he said, run over to Curzon Street, and communi-

cate the intelligence to Mrs. Bouverie ; and directly he had seen them off he started.

Unfortunately, Constance was not at home ; and, turning disconsolately from the door, it occurred to him that, instead of passing the evening alone in the lodgings, he might as well spend half-a crown, and drop into the pit at some theatre.

A piece had recently been produced which had scored a tremendous success, and he walked rapidly away in the direction of the house where it was being played. The doors had been opened some time, and when Frank got inside, he found that all the seats were taken.

He stood against the wall, beside the occupants of the first row. The curtain had just fallen on the comedietta ; and, to the accompaniment of the scraping of the fiddles in the orchestra, he watched the fashionably-dressed women and elegant young men filing into the stalls. He saw Mansell come in, irreproachable

in evening dress, and with a gardenia in his buttonhole, and momentarily envied him his prosperity. He trusted—weak as it might be—that the artist would not notice him, standing there in the pit, with a “billycock” at the back of his head.

Then his thoughts went further afield, and he wondered if literature would ever allow *him* to go to the theatre in the stalls, and spend a shilling on a buttonhole without missing the outlay. He pictured himself one of the distinguished audience who attend “First Nights,” and people—less favoured, less celebrated people—whispering to one another, and saying, “That young man sitting there is Frank Heath.”

An attendant appeared in one of the private boxes, and pulled the draperies back—the rings shot with a sharp rattle over the brass rod, and Frank looked up. Two ladies stood in the box, divesting themselves of their cloaks, and

settling their long gloves. A moment later they moved forward and sank into their chairs, and he saw that one of them was Constance.

It is to be feared that during that performance the gaze of one of the "pittites" was bent upon a certain private box more constantly than on the stage. He now desperately hated Mansell, to whom he saw her address a smiling bow, and who, correctly attired, was presently able to make his way into her presence. He saw him bend over her hand, and drop into a seat beside her. He watched the play of her features as she listened and replied, and noted Mansell's smooth, self-satisfied gestures. Her opera-glasses were lying on the satined ledge, and he saw Mansell pick them up, and play with them while he spoke. It was a trifle, but there was a familiarity in the action that made his heart grow hot. Why did not the fellow go back to his stall? Was he going to remain up there

till the end of the piece? And how could Constance permit a man to—to—well, to offend indefinitely!

As a matter of fact, the spectator was the subject of some of the conversation he was so angrily commenting on.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Heath lately?" asked Constance, in the *entr'acte*.

"I haven't; no—not for some little time," Mansell answered. "I suppose he's getting on all right, isn't he?"

"Oh yes, quite so—his editor speaks very well of him. His book hasn't come out yet."

"Ah!" said Mansell.

There are various ways of saying "Ah!" and Constance did not wholly like Mr. Mansell's.

"What does that 'Ah!' mean?" she inquired—"that you don't think it ever will appear!"

"Oh, I did not say that, Mrs. Bouverie."

"No," she returned, "you did not say so, but I gathered that you meant it. Please be frank! What *do* you think?"

"Well, since you press for my opinion, I fancy that if the book had merit, it would have found a market by this time. I am no believer in obscure genius, Mrs. Bouverie. In my experience genius is very quickly discovered and appreciated."

"I have read Mr. Heath's manuscript," said Constance, "as you know. I have not called it a work of 'genius;' but it is clever, I am positive."

"May I be quite candid?" asked the artist.

"I have begged you to be so. Go on!"

"Then don't you think it is possible that the interest you feel in the boy has coloured your views about his attainments? I have found the same kind of thing with myself—a fellow I like shows me some sketches, and I assure you they are highly promising. But no editor

will touch those sketches, and yet I may lay claim to being a decent judge."

Constance mused ; and Mansell, who was far from being such a bungler as to sneer at Frank openly, detected here 'an opportunity for some vague "impressionist" work which might be much more effectual.

"I was anxious to see young Heath get on," he continued. "I used to feel confident that he would. But one needs such abnormal perseverance to make any mark in a profession to-day, and so few of us have that. *I*, myself," he added, with an engaging laugh ; "I was simply lucky."

He took up her opera-glasses, and toyed with them meditatively.

"Your 'luck' has taken you a long way, then !" said Constance. "I read in one of the Reviews the other day that you were one of the few men in England to whom we may look to keep Art alive. The writer lamented

you did not forsake 'black and white' work altogether."

"It was very kind of him. Yes, I suppose I ought to call myself fortunate," said Mansell, with a sigh.

Constance looked an inquiry.

"But I do not," he concluded.

"You are not satisfied with what you have done?"

"I am a very lonely man, Mrs. Bouverie; and there is little likelihood of my ever being more fortunate in that respect."

There was nothing pointed in the remark; Constance had not a suspicion.

"Why don't you marry?" she said.

The other woman was sweeping the house with her *lorgnette*. Mansell risked it.

"Because I am in love!" he answered, under his breath.

"In love, and you—?"

She understood the next instant, and mar-

velled that she had never guessed it. Even in her swift astonishment she was conscious of an admiration for the subtlety with which a man who had been so much in her company had hidden such a secret from her.

"Ah, well, the crumpled rose-leaf is inevitable to us all!" she observed. "What a disgraceful time this *entr'acte* has lasted." She consulted her programme. "'Between acts two and three eighteen months elapse'—I can realize it!"

But impulse had carried him too far for him to hesitate.

"In love, and in a predicament!" he murmured. "I have fallen in love with a woman who is a very valued friend to me. If I speak to her, I may lose her friendship; if I keep silence, I lose the small chance I may possess of gaining happiness. What would you advise?"

"I have faith in instinct," replied she.

"Yours appears to tell you that the woman is your very good *friend*."

The curtain went up at the same moment, but Mansell did not depart. Chagrin and reflection both kept him in his place. Was he rejected, or not? In either case he would hear his answer in more definite form. He would put her into her carriage directly, and ask permission to call upon her—he had said too little for her to refuse, even if she found the motive for the request distasteful. He leant back in the box with folded arms, deliberating.

Frank, meanwhile, had grown tired and disgusted. The piece, seen from such a position as he occupied, bored him, and Mansell's parade of the intimate terms on which he stood with Constance, was absolutely insufferable. He, himself, had gone to her house with important tidings, only to learn that she was out, and now he was condemned to witness another man basking in the paradise of her presence,

while he perspired in the pit. It was really too bad ! However, he could still tell her his news. He would hurry round to the principal exit the second he saw her preparing to move, and whisper the fact of the book's acceptance in a brief sentence as he put her into her brougham. There was a crumb of comfort in the thought, and the prospect exhilarated him somewhat. He stood with his eyes riveted on her profile, speculating what she was talking about, and how much longer the intolerable dialogue on the stage would last. It lasted another quarter of an hour. Then he saw her rise, and, grasping his hat firmly in his hand, he made a rush for the door.

She and her friend and Mansell were among the stream of people descending the brilliantly-lighted staircase as he sped into the entrance-hall. How lovely she was, how peerless her exquisite face among the crowd of other women's—that feeble, futile crowd that sank to

insignificance beside her ! He had reached her in a moment, and stood before her, bareheaded, breathless, and adoring, fighting for words. She gave a little start of pleasure—" You ! "

" The book is taken," he gasped ; " and, oh ! I have so much to tell you about what they said. When may I come ? "

She put out both her hands—the hands he loved—in their delicate perfumed gloves, and his own were clasped in them.

" Come ! " she echoed. " Why, come *now*. Oh, my dear Frank, how perfectly delighted I am to hear it ! "

Her footman had already disappeared from the rank of expectant servants, and the next instant, " Mrs. Bouverie's carriage stops the way," was bawled up from the street.

But it was Frank who took her to it, and not Mr. Richard Mansell. The latter, who had had no opportunity of putting the question he intended, watched the proceeding with unpleasant

eyes ; and as the trio drove off, the artist, left bowing in the rain, might have been heard to mutter something that bore a close resemblance to an oath.

CHAPTER III.

IF Constance Bouverie had been of an analytical turn of mind, which she was not, she might have been interested to remark the fact that, in her heart of hearts, she found Richard Mansell's declaration of passion far more preposterous than she found her *protégé's*—on that memorable afternoon when he had flung himself at the hem of her dove-coloured tea-gown, and sworn eternal devotion under "The Spring of Love."

A few days after his discomfiture at the theatre, the artist had called at Curzon Street, and made a definite proposal of marriage, the

said proposal being as definitely declined. He was not given to dupe himself, and he realized that, whether or not he might have won her had he waited longer, she was now, at all events, lost to him without doubt. As to remaining her friend, he did not on the whole, know that he valued her friendship sufficiently to care about it alone, even assuming she would be willing to let him continue on the old footing. He was rather inclined to hold the friendship of a woman who had refused to marry him a humiliation, and he preferred to do without it. No; Mrs. Bouverie, and the prospects of participating in her enormous wealth, were hopes of the past. As to the young beggar who was, he was convinced, to some degree responsible for his failure, he wished him nothing worse than that he (Mansell) were a reviewer when his silly novel came out. "Illustrate" it? He would sit up all night with satisfaction, doing it to death, and satirizing its remains!

"Exit Mrs. Bouverie!" meditated Mansell, gloomily.

"Exit Richard Mansell!" mused Mrs. Bouverie, in thinking the matter over; and the reflection contained a certain disappointment to her also, for she had wanted to marry him to Marion Heath. Her intention of finding suitable husbands for Frank's sisters was a very firm one, and Marion had evidently liked Mansell, though perhaps not very seriously as yet. As to Christabel, she fancied the girl was interested by Stirling, which, pity as it was, prevented her none the less from providing any suitor for the younger sister. Mrs. Bouverie believed too thoroughly in marriages of affection to attempt in any way to bring coercion into play. Her personal experience had not disposed her to view *mariages de convenance* with much approval. No; Christabel must work out her own destiny so far as the Curate was concerned; very likely there was

nothing in it, and she could always assume the rôle of *dea ex machinâ* later. In the meantime she must introduce somebody upon the scene to play the part she had designed for Mansell.

Her thoughts reverted to Captain Lingard, who had certainly admired Marion, and she contrived, in the course of the next few weeks, to bring the two together upon several occasions.

Jack Lingard was that delightful combination, an excellent fellow with large means. He had, moreover, expectations — expectations which would cause the woman he had made his wife to be fervently detested by half the girls in London. The heir to Aubrey Court, and a rent-roll which must amount to close upon fifteen thousand even in the present times of depression, manœuvring mammas and diplomatic fathers had suffered greatly at his hands.

He had escaped unscathed, and, though he was still young, was beginning to be set down as "not a marrying man." It will be seen that Constance was aiming high.

He had been more struck with Marion that afternoon in Curzon Street when he saw her first than he had been with any woman for years, and their subsequent meetings confirmed him in his good opinion. "A girl with a clear head, and a loyal heart—she's a brick!" was his verdict. And he was not wrong. Marion had so little inkling of the plan in her hostess's brain, that, had she suspected it, she would have firmly declined the invitations to the house. She would have felt it shameful, an abasement, to smile at a man, and converse with him, for the purpose of inspiring him with the idea of proposing marriage to her. Constance knew it. She knew she could no more say to Marion Heath, "You will do well for yourself, if you capture Captain Lingard—do your best, dear,"

than she could insult her in any other way ; and if the girl had been more mercenary, it is probable, also, that Mrs. Bouverie would have been less interested.

One Sunday afternoon, when Frank had come to Curzon Street, flourishing his first proof-sheets, Jack Lingard was announced. He had called with a faint hope that Miss Heath might be there, and there was distinct disappointment written on his features when he saw that she was not. Constance, who allowed few things to pass unnoticed, thought she could divine the meaning of that momentary shadow on his face.

“Do you know what these are, Captain Lingard ?” she said, shaking the loose pages, laughingly. “These are that esoteric awfulness termed ‘proof-sheets’ !”

“Ah, yours ?” said Lingard, turning to Frank. “May I look ? When is your novel coming out, Mr. Heath ?”

“In about a month now, I believe. Mrs.

Bouverie has been telling you about it, I see."

"I am telling everybody about it," said Constance. "I feel a sense of part-proprietorship in this book, though I haven't written any of it; and, when it appears, I mean to make everyone I know go and inquire for it at the libraries. So now you know your duty, Captain Lingard!"

"But I haven't got a subscription at any library."

"Well, subscribe to one, then, without loss of time."

"That's rather hard on Captain Lingard, isn't it?"

Captain Lingard nodded. "I'll obey," he said. "Seriously, if it would do you any service, Mr. Heath, I'll talk about it to all the fellows I know."

"It's awfully kind of you," returned Frank, gratefully. "I'm really immensely obliged for the suggestion; but I want—if the book does

any good, you know—to feel that the work has ‘told’ fairly. It doesn’t sound priggish, does it? I don’t want to feel an impostor, in ever such a small degree—not pushed into a little popularity!”

“I see—yes, and I follow you. No, by Jove, it doesn’t sound priggish at all! It’s the right feeling, I expect, though I’m afraid I shouldn’t have the pluck to run so tremendously straight as that myself. Your sister ‘writes,’ too, does she not?”

“My elder sister does—yes. She has a taste for children’s stories, and is a contributor to *Playtime* and *Our Half-Holiday*.”

“So she mentioned,” said Lingard. “You’re a clever family, Mr. Heath; you must be proud of one another.”

Frank looked embarrassed, not knowing how to accept the compliment for the girls, while deprecating it for himself; and Constance struck in quickly to cover his confusion.

"And charming little tales Marion's are!" she declared. "There is something about them that is like no other children's stories I have read. They are distinctive."

"Aren't they!" exclaimed Jack Lingard, and then turned red and pulled his moustache, for he knew that he had let the cat out of the bag.

"You have read some of them?" asked Constance, in surprise.

"I came across one the other day," he stammered, "by chance—picked it up at the club! Er—it must be very interesting to write, Mr. Heath; I should say one of the most interesting professions there are."

Constance agreed with him, and, in the discussion upon the Art of Literature which followed, the Captain's blunder in asserting that he had picked up a journal of nursery stories in his club escaped criticism.

Lingard and Frank left together, and on the

pavement the former said: "If you haven't anything better to do, Mr. Heath, will you turn into my rooms with me, and smoke a cigar?"

Frank assented cheerfully. He had already acquired a liking for the good-looking man, who had so "taking" a manner, and who never attempted to patronize him on the strength of his seniority.

Lingard's rooms were in the vicinity of St. James's Street, and told of considerable taste on the part of the occupant, even in these days when it is easier to furnish artistically than ill. There were touches which the young fellow understood immediately had never been designed by a firm of decorators, and included in a "contract." Not that there was anything sporting or fantastic in the arrangement; everything was sober and sound. There were no foils and masks prominently displayed; no "cast from a fist" ('Not, alas! mine, but my master's, the

Tipton Slasher')"; no photographs of burlesque ladies in scant attire, or satin slippers utilized for cigarette-cases. A few good pictures—oil and pastils—adorned the walls. Here and there was some marble that repaid inspection. The books and magazines that lay about were the reading of an intelligent and appreciative man of the world.

"Sit down," said Lingard, "and make yourself at home. Will you have a brandy and soda, or some coffee, or what?"

Frank answered that he would have a cup of coffee; and the rashness of youth was rewarded, for, by the aid of a little apparatus of startling complications, his host actually produced some black coffee, to which the addition of milk would have been an insult.

"I think you will find this all right," he said. "I drink a good deal of coffee, and I'm rather particular about it. One can't get an even decent imitation of coffee outside in London,

and so I got that machine, and went in for brewing it for myself. As a nation we drink tea—I suppose because it's easier to make than anything else. Just as we boil the potato, though it's the least appetizing of all known methods of cooking it."

"You are not an admirer of the *cuisine* of your native land?" said Frank.

"The *cuisine* of my native land," responded Lingard, "is either an abomination or a robbery. I object to both things. Have a cigar."

They smoked and chatted on various topics for an hour or more, and then Frank rose, and protested that he must go. Lingard begged him to drop in and see him frequently, and he, in reply, could say no less than that he was sure his sisters would be very pleased if the other cared to journey as far as the Hampstead lodgings some afternoon."

"He is a capital chap; I like him!" he told

them, in explaining where he had been. And Marion answered,—

“Yes, dear. I am glad he wants to be friendly with you. Captain Lingard is very nice indeed.”

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was again a parcel on the parlour table, addressed to "Frank Heath, Esq.," but it was a parcel to be untied with proud delight, and examined with sparkling eyes.

The "author's copies" of "The Career of Gerald Ingram" had been just delivered, and the brother and sisters emitted little cries of pleasure as they saw them.

Mr. Benson had fulfilled his promise. The cover was as attractive as the art of *fin-de-siècle* bookbinding could make it, and the name of "Frank Heath" looked already famous in the blue gothic lettering in the corner.

Copies to be reverently handled! Copies

that begot anxiety as to the condition of the nib that should venture to write inscriptions upon those spotless fly-leaves! How nice the dedication looked: "To C. B.—A Small Expression of Life-Long Debt." There was just a suggestion of romance about it—enough to be poetical.

The girls retired into arm-chairs with a volume apiece, and hugged them. Frank sat at the table, excitedly turning over pages—perusing his work, bound and published.

Well, he could not see any mistakes that he had overlooked in the proof-reading. Here and there he perceived that Bensons had made an alteration on their own account, and been responsible for tautology by their meddling. "Caress" had been substituted for "cuddle" in one place, with the result that the word occurred twice in five lines, and the passage into which it had been introduced was distinctly weakened. He was very angry, for he composed slowly,

and with infinite care, much of which seemed thrown away and superfluous if a writer was powerless to prevent his paragraphs being disfigured at the last moment by some one else. "She swallowed convulsively," had been changed to "she gasped convulsively," though it was much more "Family Herald," and "she" had "gaspèd" twice in the chapter already. He hoped that it was not the Reader, towards whom he had cause to feel so warm a gratitude, who had erred in this stupid way. He liked to feel that the Reader was an Artist.

However, he consoled himself by remembering that the blunders which looked colossal to his own eyes would probably pass wholly unnoticed by the public; and, after packing up Constance's copy, and one for Jessop (coals of fire!), he lit a pipe, and watched the varying expressions on his sisters' faces.

And now occurred a period of feverish, of almost unendurable, suspense. How would the

novel be received ? He scarcely dared to open a paper at this time, passionately eager for the verdict as he was. The lines always swam under his gaze, as he feared he might be about to come upon a contemptuous slating of himself.

Bensons had distributed largely for review. There are multifarious kinds of newspapers—from the *Times* to the *Mudborough Examiner*—and though Bensons had hardly descended into the latter extreme, they had covered a large area.

The first “Daily” which mentioned “The Career of Gerald Ingram” was the *Crusher*.

Jessop showed it to the author one morning at the office.

“There’s a review of your book in the *Crusher*,” he said, throwing it across to where Frank sat ; “Catch !”

“Good ?” said Frank, in a voice that trembled.

"No," returned Jessop: "I can't say that it is particularly. But the *book* is, for all that, and I frankly admit it, my boy!"

"Thank you," said Frank, gently.

The *Crusher* gentleman was "getting tired of the Society novel," and, though this was hardly a matter of national interest, he prefaced his review by informing the public of the fact. "Of this class of story," he continued, "'The Career of Gerald Ingram,' by Frank Heath, is rather a poor specimen, though it possesses a by no means badly-drawn heroine."

A little milk-and-water approval of certain scenes followed, and the book was patronizingly dismissed. Frank heaved a tremulous sigh, and sat silent.

"Wait," said Jessop, "till some of the literary papers notice you—I think they will be better! It's rather a pity they hadn't come out with their reviews before the *Crusher* had had time to refer to the thing."

His words were justified. At the end of the week, the *Saturday* appeared with three-quarters of a column of unmixed praise of "The Career"—such a review as any novelist living might have read on his work with pleasure and pride. "Clever," and "polished," it pronounced it, and remarkable for "abundant touches of epigrammatic humour." "Our interest in the 'career' of the hero," concluded the reviewer, "is extended to the career of the author himself, and we await the next novel from Mr. Heath's pen with considerable expectation. It is an admirable book."

The *Spectator*, the *Speaker*, all the valuable papers, followed with encomiums equally warm. Marion and Christabel went mad, and Constance glowed. If only the public appreciated the story as highly as the Press—by no means a corollary—Frank Heath was, at two-and-twenty years of age, a made man.

And they did! *Miribile dictu*, a commercial

success was combined with an artistic one. In London—at the fag end of the nineteenth century—by an unknown pen ! The libraries were besieged. “The Career of Gerald Ingram” could not have been demanded more impatiently if it had been a slangy, “up-to-date” impropriety, which the journalists who regard reviewing seriously had disdained to read. It is better to be born lucky than rich—and in one of those rare instances that sometimes happen, the judges and the public were agreed. It was a book to get—*the* book ! Everywhere one went, people said, “Have you read ‘The Career of Gerald Ingram’ yet ?” It was the fashion, the craze. The author was interviewed. An eminent firm of photographers wrote inquiring if he would consent to favour them with a sitting. The book went into six editions in two months, and Mr. Benson—whose jubilation had its alloy of regret—sent him cheques as “royalties,” which amounted to a dazzling sum.

And did he lose his head—did he become a prig, and “put on side,” under this test of his disposition? It must be admitted that he lost a little, just a little, of that boyish humility which had been one of his charms, but he was still the good-hearted young fellow whom everybody liked, though a good many, now, were jealous of him. The girls had so many new frocks, that at last they firmly refused to let him buy them any more; and there were evenings at the theatre, in the so-recently coveted stalls, preluded by little dinners, or supplemented by suppers at a restaurant.

Constance was about to leave town, and before she went, he begged her to be his guest at one of these parties; he designed an elaborate one, he explained, in honour of his success. He had showered so many baskets of flowers and bon-bons upon her since what he playfully called his “accession to wealth,” that she was somewhat reluctant to be an excuse for

his spending any more money, but she could do no less than accept, under the circumstances. He had pressed her continually to mention an evening when she would be disengaged, and she had always put off doing so. She said she would be free on the following Thursday, and added that she would be delighted.

So was the boy. The thought of being her host thrilled him, and he did not know how to be extravagant enough in his preparations in her honour. Sarah Bernhardt was in London, and after being disappointed at several of the ticket-offices, he was lucky enough to obtain one of the best boxes in the house—a box which had been returned owing to some domestic loss. He drove to the best place he could select, and secured a private room for a dinner of four, and, recognizing his inexperience, was wise enough to put himself unreservedly in the *chef's* hands.

“I want absolutely the best dinner that can be had,” he said; “but it must not be too long.

Nothing tedious ; and plenty of sweets and fruit. My guests are ladies ; they like dry champagne, so give us the best brand in the cellars, but as for the other wines, choose those that commend themselves to ladies rather than to men. I should like to see the waiter that will attend on us."

The head-waiter deferentially intimated that he himself would have that honour—assisted.

"If the service is really good," said Frank, "and there are no delays between the courses—no waiting for the coffee or liqueurs, or any of those hitches I abominate, there will be a couple of sovereigns to you as a tip, and a pound to your assistant. Be ready for us at seven o'clock, please."

Then he drove up Regent Street, to a florist's, and ordered three bouquets to be lying on the dinner-table when he and his party arrived.

"I don't know what dress one of the ladies will wear," he said ; "please make up the third

bouquet of the palest tints of roses, so that it will go with anything. But let it be a bouquet that you would be satisfied to put on exhibition."

He had only one regret now. There would not be a private entrance, and an escort, to the box at the theatre. He would have liked Constance conducted to it as if she had been Royalty!

That he was able to show her a few attentions now—was no longer a penniless boy with nothing but ambitions—was as heaven to him. He had a banking account, and a future! Two or three more books would see him occupying a fairly substantial position; nothing to be mentioned in the same breath with hers, of course, but still something, and boasting a name besides. Then too, he was being imperceptibly trusted with more important work upon the *Hyde Park*. Was it so ridiculous that he might hope to marry her in a couple more years? He did not

think so ; he could not see that it was ! He would be quite independent enough to scorn the imputation of mercenary motives, and to propose to any woman without a blush. A good many women, he dared say, would be flattered to receive a proposal from "Frank Heath, the author !" And Constance had always liked him. *Why* should he not ask her ?

The question obtruded itself on the eventful evening, when, with the successful dinner over, he sat behind her chair at *Fédora*, the fragrance of the roses he had given her stealing up into his face. Marion and Christabel, watching him, exchanged glances, and wondered to what lengths his madness would carry him, and, if he spoke indeed, what answer he would obtain. Only Constance, apparently, saw and divined nothing. Yet, in moments, her mind, too, was busy, and she asked herself, like the girls, how mad the boy might be. She recognized that he

was more dangerous now than a while ago ; that he had acquired the right to speak more definitely, and to exact a plain reply. He was twenty-two, and *she*——. What reply but one was possible ; she was as foolish as he, in considering so manifest an absurdity !

The scent of the roses intoxicated him ; the presence of the woman he adored—the genius of a great actress on the stage—mounted to his brain like wine. It was a potent combination, and provocative of a mighty oath. When the act-drop fell, to the hysterical plaudits of a frenzied house, Frank Heath had sworn in his soul that, on the following day, he would ask Constance to be his wife.

CHAPTER V.

SHE was just stepping out of the victoria as he reached the house, and they went to the door together.

"You are back later than usual to-day, are you not?" he said. "I thought you would have returned some time ago."

"It was such a perfect afternoon. One of the rare days when London is endurable!"

"And yet you live here!"

"Do you advise me to go away?" asked Mrs. Bouverie.

"A thousand times 'no;' I shall miss you enough, even during your few weeks' absence," he answered. And they passed into the hall,

and thence to the room to which she welcomed only her most intimate friends.

He sank into the depths of an easy-chair, and watched her divest herself of bonnet and cape, and give them to the maid. She seemed to be intensely lovable, and even girlish, as she stood before the mirror, patting her hair with the soft, white hands, from which she had just drawn the gloves. Could anything have been less ceremonious—more charming—than the air with which she turned from the glass, and asked him, laughingly : “ Am I all right ? ”

The room opened upon a miniature grotto, and when the footman had entered with tea, and they were alone, Frank sat gazing thoughtfully at the sparkling water dripping among the ferns, as if for inspiration. The proposal, in cold blood, did not appear so easy as it had last evening. If one’s anxieties decrease with a night’s rest, so also does the ardour of one’s impulses. He was conscious he could have

been much more eloquent eighteen hours ago than was possible to him now.

“You are quiet!” said Mrs. Bouverie.

He roused himself with a start.

“I beg your pardon. I am quiet only because there is so much I have to say.”

“That’s too deep for me,” she answered, a shade nervously. “How are the girls after their dissipation?”

“Thanks, very well. Mrs. Bouverie, I have something to say that has been in my heart for years! Perhaps you will think I should have done better to keep it there still; but the temptation to speak now is too strong for me. I can’t keep it back! Whatever happens, I don’t want to keep it back—you are the world to me—I love you!”

He had left his seat, and was standing, with cheeks as white as death, at her side.

“It is more than ‘love,’ it is a religion, the feeling I have for you! Everything I do,

everything I say, I ask myself always, ‘How would *she* approve?’ No man, no one in the length and breadth of the earth could worship you with a greater devotion. I would die a thousand deaths at a look from you. I have nothing to offer you ; I am as a beggar at your feet. But listen to me ; it is my life itself that is in your hands !”

She was nearly as pale as he ; only her eyes shone.

“What can I say to you?” she murmured ; “Frank, my poor boy, what can I say to you but that I am sorry ?—sorrier than words can tell.”

“Oh, Constance, be merciful !”

He knelt by her chair, and rained kisses upon her hand.

“Be merciful,” he repeated. “Oh, my darling, my queen, be merciful as you are strong. You say you cannot put your sorrow into words, but *I*—how shall I express my love? It has

grown and grown till it is too big for my soul ; how can I compress it into the few minutes that you will give me leave to speak ? If I could tell you, if I could make you understand, all you have become to me ; if I could describe to you the hours, and months, and years during which the thought of one day winning you for my wife has been my solace, and my stimulus, and my prayer, you would be tender to me, you would realize the abject misery to which you condemn me if you refuse. Constance, I implore you, I entreat—Ah, Constance, for God's sake—”

There was something like a sob in his throat, and for a minute neither spoke. Then he rose, and stood looking down at her, waiting her reply.

“ Frank,” she said—and he had never heard so gentle a tone from her before, never one quite so sweet as this—“ I think I do know how you love me ; and when I say that it can't be,

I want you to believe I do not say it lightly, that I do not dismiss your love without appreciating it as it deserves. I will say no more. I feel what you have said to me to be the greatest honour I have ever received in my life."

"But, oh, why—?"

"Shall I tell you what it would mean to you if I said 'yes'?" she continued. "At first you would be very happy; but not for very long—a few years, perhaps, at most. I am a 'goddess' to you now, but when I became your wife I should be a woman; and a woman who grew older and less attractive as you grew manlier and better-looking. The disparity between us would increase more and more, and when you were forty—ah, it sounds a great age to you now, but at forty a man is at his best—I should be lined and listless, and the hand you have been kissing would be wrinkled, dear. You would see women who looked as beautiful to

you then as you think me to-day, and you would turn your eyes from them to your wife with a regret that you would never quite manage to hide. You would think you hid it, but if I loved you I should feel it, and be as wretched as yourself. I should watch your disenchantment growing and growing, and know that it was all my fault. And though you would never reproach me, the consciousness would be with me all the time that I had spoilt your life."

"I would worship you! You say that you value my love, and yet you can misjudge me like this! You would be all in all to me for ever."

"You think so now," she said, sadly; "but you will thank me later that I was wise enough to save you from yourself. Let me tell you what your life will be—the real life that lies ahead of you. You will be very miserable, but not for very long—a few months, perhaps, at

most. I am an angel to you now, but when you lose sight of me I shall be only a recollection. The pain you suffer to-day will become less and less, and when you meet a girl younger, and prettier, and more suited in every way than I am, there will be a gratitude towards me in your heart that you never thought to feel."

"Constance ! You are cruel !"

She shook her head. "I am kind ; and, besides all this, I am not in love with you, Frank ; I am only fond of you."

"Oh, dearest, but with time—I don't beg of you to be my wife at once. I know, I know. I would work ; I would make myself famous. When I was somebody—when I had written more books—*then !*"

"Not when you have written half-a-hundred. Never."

He groaned, leant his arms upon the mantle-piece, his forehead bowed upon them. There was a long silence, broken by her :

“But ‘fond’ of you I shall always be. Don’t grieve, even for a little while, more than you can help. I shan’t think you love me any better because I hear of you looking gaunt and hollow-eyed. And when you feel you can do it safely, when you are sure your love is conquered, come here as usual, Frank, and be the best of my friends again.”

“God bless you !” he stammered.

The tiny clock on the mantleshef struck seven, and he had no excuse for lingering. He advanced a step towards her, with outstretched hand ; her own met it, and melted in his clasp. His eyes devoured her, and besought. She was not stone. “For once,” he muttered, huskily—“once.”

And then, in a foretaste of Paradise, Constance Bouverie was in his arms, and his lips were burning on her face.

CHAPTER VI.

JACK LINGARD lost no time in availing himself of the author's invitation to look him up at the Hampstead lodgings, and he soon became a frequent visitor. A nice girl is more attractive in her home than anywhere else, and he found a fascination in Marion Heath that he was neither able nor wishful to resist.

Nor is it to be supposed that Marion could long remain in ignorance of the admiration she had inspired in him. If she herself had been blind to it, Chrissie's raillery would have

opened her eyes; and she was not blind. She was fully aware she was the magnet that drew Captain Lingard so constantly north-west, and she wondered sometimes how serious the feeling she had awakened in him might be.

An unpublished rule in the Book of Etiquette ordains that a well-conducted maiden shall have no pronounced sentiment towards a young man until he, with all propriety, acknowledges that he loves her, but it is a code more honoured in the breach than the observance. No woman was more womanly than Marion Heath, yet it is not to be denied that as the months passed by she did hope that Lingard cared for her really, and knew that she would be very unhappy if he did not.

Her brother is seldom the most discerning person living in the matter of a woman's love affairs, and when he is suffering from the pangs

of unrequited passion on his own account, he is rather more obtuse than usual. While Lingard was gazing at Marion as if she were the most wonderful of the world's wonders, and Chrissie was indulging in visions of a bridesmaid's frock, and wedding favours, Frank was simply engrossed by the occupation of anathematizing the cruelty of Fate.

Of course he dissipated in his efforts to forget. Most men do that, and a young one does it always. There is a sense of fitness about the proceeding which commends itself to him unfailingly. It is the artistic sequel to a rejection, he feels: recklessness, and gaslight, and a breaking heart;—he is so satisfied with the romantic part he is playing, that the heart begins to mend.

But Frank did not go far on the road to the dogs. Instinctively the course repelled him, and after awhile he began to stop at home again at night and to meditate another novel,

which should be a veritable—Byronic—*cri du cœur*. Nevertheless, that anybody else on earth could be in love—especially two people right under his very nose—never occurred to him for a single moment.

It was Chrissie who enlightened him, when they were sitting together one evening. Marion declined to discuss the subject with her, and she had to talk about it to some one, or suffer in her health.

“Well,” she observed, “I suppose you and I may resign ourselves to being left alone soon, Frank?”

“Eh?” he said, with a start.

“To judge by appearances,” she added.

“What are you talking about?” he asked; “I don’t understand you.”

“After we’ve lost Marion, I mean. When she’s gone.”

“‘Gone’!” Frank turned pale. “Is—is she ill? Chrissie, what is it?”

Chrissie went off into peals of laughter, while he stared at her, helplessly.

"D—o—o you sit there and t—t—tell me," she gasped, "that you—ha, ha, ha!—that you haven't *seen* anything? Oh, this is the richest thing I ever heard in—in—in all my life! 'Is she ill?'" She shook with a paroxysm of merriment which she was unable to subdue, and Frank began to look indignant.

"When you have quite finished appreciating an invisible joke," he said, with dignity, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain yourself. What is the matter with Marion, and *where* is she going?"

"She is in love," said Christabel, in a voice that still trembled; "and I should say there is every probability that she is going to be married. What a perfect bat you must be! Why, in the name of reason, what did you suppose brought Captain Lingard up here two

or three times a week? Did you think he came to talk to *you*? Oh, my goodness! 'Is she ill?' " She laid her head on the table, and suffocated.

"Marion and Jack Lingard in love with each other—is that a fact?" demanded Frank, in astonishment. "Or is it some silly nonsense you have imagined?"

"You'll find it pretty real shortly, I expect," said Chrissie; "if *I* am any judge of these matters, your friend will propose the very next five minutes that he finds himself alone with her." She sat up and dried her eyes; "You mark my words, my guileless infant—your sister Marion will be 'Mrs. Jack Lingard,' and asking us to dinner, in Belgravia, before you've worn your last suit of clothes out. You see!"

"Well, I am amazed!" said Frank, in a tone that threatened Chrissie's gravity again; "I hadn't an idea of it." His own misfortune

recurred to him, and he groaned dismally ; " I'm sure I hope they may be happy together," he declared, " very happy."

Chrissie looked sympathetic, for she knew of what he was thinking. On the whole, his sisters had not been sure that they were anxious to see him marry a woman so much older than himself as Mrs. Bouverie was, but it needed no occult wisdom to understand that he had proposed to her, and they could feel for the pain of his rejection none the less.

Constance had returned from the Continent, and though she had seen nothing of him since that interview they had had in her sanctum, she had not suffered the occurrence to cause any diminution of her intimacy with the girls. She knew from Chrissie of the frequency of Jack Lingard's visits, and was delighted at the successful outcome of her project. Lingard himself, too, when he called upon her, was at no

pains to deny his subjection, and there was little doubt in her mind that the elder of Frank's sisters would very speedily contract a marriage desirable in every way.

She had heard of Frank's vagaries in search of forgetfulness, with considerable pain, and had even gone so far as to meditate a remonstrance. She had been deterred, however, by the thought that such a step would be more likely to deepen his infatuation than anything else, and had resolved to withhold it, for the present, at all events.

Now that he had returned to the fold without her aid, she congratulated herself warmly on her wisdom in having kept silent, and, as often as she saw Christabel or Marion, inquired about his welfare.

Perhaps these inquiries bespoke more than she was aware of, or even than she acknowledged to exist in her self-examinations, or perhaps it was only the romantic fancy of her

listeners ; but on one occasion, when both girls had been calling at Curzon Street, and were wending their way home, Chrissie said suddenly,—

“Does anything strike you about Mrs. Bouverie when she speaks of Frank, Marion ?”

“Strike me ?” said Marion, guiltily.

“You know what I mean ! Has it ever occurred to you that she cares for him ?”

And though they decided next minute it was the most ridiculous of notions, it was curious that it should have ever entered their heads.

It was a fortnight later when Jack Lingard spoke. Though Chrissie might have the best intentions in the world towards the lovers, the limited arrangement of their *ménage* did not lend itself to her leaving them *tête-à-tête* without putting her sister to embarrassment. The “diplomacy” would be too obvious in an

establishment consisting of one parlour and a couple of bedrooms.

On the red-letter day when the avowal was made, it chanced, by a piece of good fortune, upon which Chrissie never ceased to felicitate herself, that Marion was indoors alone when Captain Lingard was announced. Chrissie had gone to the High Street to buy a couple of tubes of colour for her painting, and she had scarcely left the house when he rang the bell.

"Christabel will be back directly," said Marion, after the greeting; "she will be sorry she was out." It was one of those things it is necessary to say.

He put his hat on the little side-table, out of the way, and took the basket-chair opposite her.

"Don't put your writing down," he begged; "let me watch you while you work."

Marion laughed: "I am afraid I should be

rather dull company ; besides, the story is just finished.’

“Do you always work like that,” he asked, “with the portfolio on your lap ? If I wrote, I believe I should want a huge desk and a study, and a revolving chair, and all the appurtenances of a Dickens.”

“It depends on *how* you wrote. Now, my little tales are insignificant enough under any circumstances. To demand so much as that in order to produce them, would make me more ashamed of them still. You know they say that Mrs. Stowe wrote ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ with the paper on her lap, and her foot rocking the baby’s cradle.”

“Really ! What is it called ? ”

“‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ ? ”

“No, no ; yours—what you’ve just done ? ”

“‘Marjorie’s Ride.’ Marjorie is a little girl in the nursery, who has not learnt the first three verses of ‘King Bruce and the Spider,’ as her

governess told her to do, and the governess insists that she shall get them by heart before dinner. Marjorie is left in the room alone, and it is a beautiful summer day, and she feels very ill-used. She looks out of the window into the fields, and sees the stream sparkling between the trees, and the cattle browsing, knee-deep, in the clover ; and she wishes she could run away and play, does Marjorie, and she gets hot, tired, and disagreeable over the lesson-book."

"That's good," said Jack ; "I used to get hot, and tired, and disagreeable over lesson-books, myself."

"Well, presently she looks down at the floor, and sees a spider on the carpet. And the spider grows bigger and bigger, and then, don't you know, it speaks to her, and says if she is anxious to run away from home she may get on its back, and it will fly right away with her out of the window."

"Never had a visit from a talkative spider myself," said Jack; "but things may have altered since my time."

"Oh, but of course she has fallen asleep over the verses, and is dreaming," explained Marion, "only my readers aren't to suspect that till the end. That's the beauty of my juvenile public, you see—one's mysteries are so delightfully effective. Well, naughty Marjorie jumps at the offer, and presently she is clapping her hands and sailing on the spider's back across the meadows she was just looking at so longingly. But after a while, the spider takes her into the town over the house-tops. And she looks down through a roof, and sees a poor little girl in rags, lying on a mattress, and crying big tears. Marjorie asks the spider what's the matter with her; and the spider says she is hungry, and that her mother has no bread to give her. Then they fly on; and presently my heroine sees another child, covered with bruises, and moaning on a

bare floor. The spider informs her that this little girl has a wicked father who beats her with a stick. Marjorie is intensely sympathetic, and begins to feel that her own lot is not such a hard one, after all, by comparison with the sights she sees. The spider goes on showing her more improving objects—with appropriate comments—until she is ashamed to think she was ever so ungrateful as to wish to leave her nice comfortable home. And just as she is longing to be back in it there is a ‘knock-knock-knocking’ in her ears, and, waking up bewildered, she sees the governess standing at the dear old nursery door. Marjorie runs to her and sobs in her lap, and begs forgiveness for her laziness. And then she learns her verses without more ado, and has boiled chicken and cauliflower, and a pudding with currants in it. It’s a touching moral lesson, you see, and will certainly be worth a whole guinea to me.”

Jack laughed, and applauded. “But,”

he said, "I should like you to have the big desk, and the revolving chair, etc., all the same."

"To write stories about my 'Marjories'?"

"To write whatever you liked!" He pulled his big moustache, and looked confused. "Miss Heath—Marion—I should like to *give* you that desk and chair, and—and the house to put them in! Dearest, if it were a very large house, do you think there would be room enough in it for *me*?"

"Captain Lingard!"

"Would a husband be in the way in it? Marion, I've been in love with you ever since that first day I saw you in Curzon Street. Will you—can you care enough about me to be my wife?"

She had risen abruptly, and all the sheets of manuscript were scattered on the floor; but neither noticed them.

"*Can* you?" he repeated.

"I am sure I *do*," she answered steadily. She put out her hand, and he caught and kissed it—took her in his arms, and kissed her lips.

"My darling," he exclaimed ecstatically, "if I ever give you cause to regret it, may I be punished as I deserve! Oh, Marion, you have made me the happiest man in the world."

"I think," she whispered, "that *you* have made *me* the happiest woman!"

"Ah, Captain Lingard," said Christabel, entering the room from her excursion, "how d'you do?"

"I never 'did' so delightfully before in my life," he assured her, while Marion blushed. "But, if you don't mind, Miss Chrissie Heath, you had better get used to calling me 'Jack'!"

"Oh!" gasped Chrissie, spasmodically. And then she was congratulating them both in a

breath, and there ensued the noisiest and merriest tea-party in London, which lasted until Frank came in, and could be told the news too.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. BENSON had taken a strong liking to the young man whose "Career of Gerald Ingram" had made so unexpected a success. When Frank called at Messrs. Benson and Sons' in the matter of his royalties, the publisher would question him as to the plot of his novel on the stocks, and, after the first few chapters of this were fairly under way, would throw out an occasional suggestion from the depths of his experience which was not without value.

One morning the author found on his table at the office of the *Hyde Park* a note inviting

him to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Benson on the following Wednesday. He read it with gratified surprise, and, it need hardly be added, accepted it forthwith. Jessop, when apprised of its contents, first grunted, and then told him that he was too great a fool to appreciate his own luck.

“You’re just the kind of young ass that Fortune does smile on,” said the Sub. “You take it all for granted, and don’t even know that you ought to be grateful. And Fortune’s a woman!”

“I think I *am* grateful,” said Frank; “I know there are a good deal older and cleverer men than I who can’t make bread and butter.”

“‘Cleverer!’” growled Jessop. “Listen to his modesty! Yes, my lad; there *are* some cleverer; and their books—that the public never took any notice of—are worth more than anything you will ever do if you live to be a hun-

dred. Not that I say your novel wasn't good, mind; only that it didn't deserve such a fuss as was made of it. It is all very jolly for you, Heath," he went on, more quietly, "but your success has got its drawback. You remind me of a little pampered kid that's been set down to hot-house grapes and half-guinea peaches at the dining-room table, on a velvet chair; you know the fruit is very nice, but you don't appreciate it a tithe as well as you would have done if you had had to walk about the streets with a penny in your pocket and flatten your eager nose against the fruiterer's window first. There are more like you to-day."

"And shall I come down like a stick?" inquired Frank, "or will my 'efforts at a boom' last, do you suppose?"

"You'll go on!" asserted Jessop. "You've got just the amiable bumptiousness, that sunny self-satisfaction, that carries a young man

along in the world. Yes, you'll prosper—I shouldn't wonder if you started a Society journal by-and-by! When you do, if you like, I'll come and show you how to edit it. You can call me your 'Sub,' and have all the speaking tubes, and Turkey carpet, you know."

"I'll remember the suggestion," said Frank; "much obliged."

He liked Mr. Benson, who made no disguise of considering him a very talented young fellow, much better. "After all," he mused, "it's Benson, who has succeeded in life, who thinks well of me, and Jessop, who has failed, who criticizes me severely. Ah, jealousy, jealousy, how pitiful it is, to be sure!" And perhaps there was more than a modicum of truth in this egotism; at any rate, there was egotism in the truth.

Though the firm was still styled "Messrs. Benson and Sons," Benson *père*—the father of

the present Bensons, and the grandson of the founder of the house—was long since dead, and the business was now entirely in the hands of Archibald Benson (Frank's friend) and his brother.

Mr. Archibald Benson resided in Portman Square, and when the hansom deposited Frank there the following Wednesday evening, he saw that, as he had surmised, he had been invited to make one of a large party.

He found Mrs. Benson a motherly person, who looked a good deal older than he had expected her to look. She welcomed him warmly, and murmured in flattering words how much she had "enjoyed his book." The author thanked her in a tone by which he strove to imply that he was really far from being satisfied with it himself. Then he was presented to several people whom he knew very well by name—a popular authoress, who looked quite the last person in the world likely to have

written her novels; a violinist, and an actor-manager and his wife, just back from a triumphant tour in the United States—and he was introduced to his host's daughter, who echoed some of the kind things about "The Career of Gerald Ingram" which her mother had said.

Miss Dolly Benson was a graceful, willowy girl of about twenty. She had a cloud of blond hair, and fascinating blue eyes of the appealing kind that you often see in people who are a trifle short-sighted. Her mouth was a veritable Cupid's bow, and Frank immediately decided she was one of the prettiest girls he had ever met in his life. Though he was ardently in love with Mrs. Bouverie, he was sorry it did not fall to his lot to take her down to dinner instead of a lady who evidently had not read "The Career," though she seemed to feel it was her duty to talk to him about it, and pretend she had.

However, he had a chat with Miss Benson in the drawing-room afterwards. The violinist obliged with Spohr's "Adagio" in F, from the Ninth Concerto, and Félicien David's "At the Fountain," and then an ambitious amateur got his fingers into knots over Liszt's "Le Rossignol," and the performances proceeding on a downward scale of excellence, a little hum of conversation became gradually general.

"I suppose you read a great deal, Miss Benson?" said Frank, finding himself beside her.

"Oh, yes," she murmured; "I am awfully fond of it. But how I envy the people that come here who can write!"

"Why don't you write a novel yourself?" he said. "You'd be sure——" He coughed, and coloured, and cursed his stupidity for the slip. Could anything have been more tactless?—and with a girl on whom he was vaguely wishful to make a good impression.

But the blue eyes met his own with amusement, and she gave a little rippling laugh.

“‘I should be sure of a publisher,’ you were going to say! I’m not so certain that I should; papa is a horrid critic, you know.”

“I’ve found him a very kind one; I don’t know what I should have done without him, in fact!”

His blunder seemed to diminish the formality between them, for, presently, he found himself talking to her of the period before the MS. had found acceptance.

“It went to your father’s with the first pages all fresh and clean,” he acknowledged; “but it was a deception, a wicked fraud, like the strawberries they put at the top of the basket. It had been refused by half-a-dozen firms.”

“How *awful!*” she said, sympathetically;

"and would papa have declined it, if he had known it had been submitted to lots of other people without success?"

"Well, I don't suppose it would have exactly prejudiced him in its favour," he answered; "at all events, that was my idea at the time."

"How nice it must be," said Miss Benson, "to be able to look back like that—to be able to recall disappointments when they don't matter any more! I should say it was one of the sweetest things in fame."

"Oh, 'fame'!" he echoed; "I'm not *famous*. I'm really only on the first rung or two of the ladder."

"Two or three!" suggested Miss Benson, smiling.

"Well, two or three, then. I hope to do a great deal better than I've done—I hope you'll think I do!"

"Will all your books be published by papa?"

"I trust so," he replied. "But perhaps Mr. Benson mayn't think much of my next one, and will send it back to me, 'Declined with thanks!'"

"Oh! You *know* that won't be."

"I should certainly be horribly disappointed if it did happen. If it does, Miss Benson, I shall write you a distracted note imploring you to intercede for me. Will you?"

She nodded. "I'd do my best under those unlikely circumstances, rely on me. Oh, how horrid! mamma wants me to go and sing."

She rose, and turned to him with a little glance of resignation as she crossed the room. Frank followed, and stood among the others by the piano till the conclusion of the song, when he joined his voice to those beseeching for another. Next, his hostess inquired if he sang himself, and he scored quite a success with his favourite ballad, into which he threw

a tremendous amount of expression. He was, however, disappointed to find Miss Benson inaccessible on its conclusion, and consoled himself by looking at her across the room while he talked perfunctorily to someone else.

Presently she met his gaze, and smiled, and in a minute or two he lounged away, and drifted circuitously in her direction.

"Let me say 'thank you' again for the songs you gave us," he said. "How can you mind singing with such a voice as you have?"

"You are fond of music? Oh, but I needn't ask! I could tell it. Are you nervous? I am horribly."

"I should never have dreamt it; and I am sure you have no need to be."

He stood searching rather awkwardly for something further to say. It is not easy to take up a conversation at the point where it was

broken off, and he was oppressed with the consciousness that, in its resumption, he was not showing to advantage. The more strongly he admired her, the less he appeared to find to talk about. There was a pause which seemed to him to last five minutes, and to stamp him as an idiot in her eyes for ever. He was sorry that he had yielded to the temptation to return to her.

"Well, won't you tell me about the novel you are going to write, Miss Benson?" he stammered at last, in desperation.

"The novel I am *not* going to write, you mean," she answered. He fancied, with a shudder, that her tone sounded bored.

"Then the novel you are 'not going to write.' Why not? I should be very interested to read it."

"Ah, but you see you scarcely make a public." She unfurled her fan, and certainly her attention wandered.

"It is very warm, isn't it, this evening?" he said, inspecting the tips of his shoes.

"Very."

The violinist was passing them, and the smile that had just lured Frank over to her lighted her face again. The Italian stopped, and complimented her on her voice with a spontaneous flow of words that enraged young Heath as greatly as his easy attitude—as the inviting smile itself, as his own embarrassment. An anecdote from the opera stage followed, rendered the funnier by the broken English in which it was narrated. The place of honour was certainly the musician's; more than that, Frank, with his tongue a leaden weight, began to feel himself the proverbial and superfluous "third."

He rose, and, with some muttered remark, retired into obscurity, leaving the conqueror in possession of the field. Why—from what unaccountable cause—had he been so painfully

stupid all at once? What was the explanation of it? It was not that he had had no desire to talk; on the contrary, he had wished to do so very much. Miss Benson was very nice—very attractive; he could spend a quarter of an hour far worse than by having a chat with her. Why, then, had she exercised so curious an effect upon him? He had never felt so mortified in all his life.

When he took his leave Mrs. Benson told him that she hoped to see him soon again, and added that her “Day” was the first and third Tuesday; but even the fact that he would thus be given an opportunity of effacing the bad impression he must have created was powerless to assuage the chagrin he endured.

He assured himself that it was really of no consequence—unimportant, and trivial. Whether the girl considered him brilliant or the reverse, it did not matter to him! Nevertheless his

philosophy was powerless to dispel his humiliation ; and he was still reflecting how poor a figure he must have cut in Miss Benson's eyes when he reached home, and went to bed.

CHAPTER VIII.

LINGARD pressed for a brief engagement, and there really seemed no reason for making it a long one. Marion's *trousseau* was not to be so extensive that a few weeks would be insufficient to procure it, and, since the whole of the Continent was a *terra incognita* to her, there was small difficulty in the way of Jack mapping out an enchanting wedding tour.

Constance had insisted that the girl should be married from Curzon Street.

"I know," she said, "that neither you nor

Captain Lingard cares a rush where the breakfast is, or whether you have a breakfast at all, but I should feel very unhappy if you didn't let me be of some use to you on a day like that; and considering that it was in my house that you first met each other, I think I'm entitled to make a point of it."

Could there be any answer but one to such graciousness? Marion replied by putting her arms round her friend's neck, and embracing her. Words were superfluous, and the matter was settled with a silent kiss.

But if her preparations included no dinner dresses from Pingat or Félix, and no twenty-guinea tea-gowns, Marion had, nevertheless, more pretty things than she had ever possessed before in her life. Frank had behaved very handsomely, and there were long days in which the two girls simply revelled in the excitement of "shopping," leaving home early in the

morning and returning at twilight, breathless, but entranced. Constance would have liked the *trousseau* to be a gift from herself, but she felt that the suggestion would be in bad taste, and so sought relief in three rows of pearls, with a heart-shaped diamond clasp, which she sent to the *fiancée*—it might fitly have been sent to a duchess—"with her warmest love and congratulations."

Jack also appeared to spend his time debating on what offerings money might be lavished. Flowers and bon-bons, or flowers and fruit, were delivered at the lodgings daily ; the initials of the stones that formed the engagement ring spelt his adored one's name—and it had cost a sum that would have made her shudder, had she guessed it. He seldom took a stroll without falling a prey to the fascinations of a dagger of brilliants and tortoiseshell, or a *porte-bonheur*, or an opal crescent, or some jewel or another, more or less expensive, that sparkled twelve hours

later in her lap. As to the gloves he bought, she and Chrissie both declared they could never wear them all out if they lived to be a hundred. He tasted, at this time, what is perhaps the keenest delight of life—being able to give inordinately to a woman who reciprocated his passionate devotion. But he knew his devotion was intense enough to withstand the test in store for it ; and, radiant as he was, he begged of her that their union might be soon.

“I want to be able to give to my wife,” he said ; “I want to loiter with you through Bond Street, or the Rue de la Paix, and hear you say, ‘Oh, Jack, that duck of a brooch, how I should love it !’ and be able to take you in and give it to you right off. And I want you to go out shopping and waste money Literally—I want you to waste money ! You never had the chance of doing it, my darling, and one of the greatest pleasures I shall have in our life to-

gether will be to see you come in from your drive with five or ten pounds' worth of rubbish that has taken your fancy, and that you won't know what to do with when you've got it."

"I don't think I shall ever do that, Jack," Marion answered. "You'll be generosity itself, I know; but I shall never take advantage of it—on the contrary, I foresee that I shall be the economical partner. I have learnt to know the value of money, you see, dear, though I can go crazy over nice things."

Jack contented himself with a hug, and mentally questioned what he could buy for her next.

As the day that had been fixed for the marriage drew near, she and Chrissie talked almost incessantly of the future in store for them both. It was impossible not to suppose that the younger girl and Frank would miss

her when she was married, and there were even moments when she felt that she was acting selfishly in leaving them.

"I am afraid it will be awfully dull for you, Chris," she said, "with Frank away all day, and busy on his book when he gets back! You'll have to come and see Jack and me lots as soon as we return to town."

"I *shall*, don't fear!" Christabel declared. "But I shan't be so lonely as you think; I have my painting, and I mean to belong to Mudie's, and—and there is Miss Stirling, you know. I shall get on all right; she is coming to fetch me for a walk every morning."

"And you may occasionally see *Mr.* Stirling," said Marion, slyly, "or doesn't that count?"

Christabel's face flushed, and for a moment she did not reply. At last she said,—

"Mr. Stirling is too poor to think of marrying, even if he liked me; and he has his sister to consider. If he took a wife—"

"Miss Stirling would dearly like it to be you," concluded Marion; "she told me so the other day."

"Did she?" faltered Chris. "Really?"

"Really and truly. And what is more, she told me in the greatest confidence that her brother was hopelessly in love with a certain person."

"And did she," asked Chrissie, "did she say whether she thought the 'certain person' was suited to be a clergyman's wife?"

"She said she was sure that Miss Christabel Heath would make her brother very, very happy, indeed; so it is to be assumed she does think so."

"Ah, well!" said Chrissie; "what nonsense we are talking! I think my constitution requires a *siesta* now. Your Jack will be here

directly. Where's the last number of *Playtime*? I haven't read 'Marjorie's Ride' in print yet."

The last of the intervening days at length slipped by, and the wedding morning dawned warm and clear. Frank had, of course, obtained a holiday for the occasion, and, having ordered a new frock coat, the tails of which were in the very latest fashion, and sallied forth early to procure a perfectly fascinating buttonhole, he retired to array himself with as scrupulous a care as if he were the bridegroom. He was prepared to accept Mrs. Bouverie's conditions. He was resigned to being the "best of her friends" again, and this would be the first time he had seen her since his proposal. He was anxious to look well as he murmured his compliance, and, as he quitted his room, with a farewell glance in the mirror, he was complacently conscious he had succeeded.

The ceremony—why should I describe it! The bride was orthodoxly pale, and nervous; and that the groom was not entirely composed either was manifest by the way the fingers of his right hand kept wandering in the direction of his waistcoat pocket, to assure himself that he had not forgotten the ring. He, however, uttered his responses valiantly, and presently Jack and Marion were man and wife, and everybody was in the vestry, and then out of the church again, driving away to Curzon Street.

Here, perhaps, the proceedings were less uncomfortable than usual, but there was never a wedding breakfast yet for whose termination everyone did not inwardly pray; and Constance, and Frank, and even the tearful Chrissie, were equally relieved when the bride's satin was exchanged for a travelling costume, and the happy pair had departed for Victoria in a shower of rice. Both of the principals had

stipulated that the affair should be a small one, and by and by the Heaths and Mrs. Bouverie were the only occupants of the room. Christabel dropped into an arm-chair, and began to cry feebly, and Frank, who had been begged to smoke, soothed his nerves with a cigarette.

"Come, dear," said Constance to the girl, "there's nothing to be upset about. Let us all go and have some tea in peace and quietness, and let them clear this *débris* away."

"I know I'm very f-f-foolish," quavered Chrissie, "but I can't help it. We shall never be the same to one another again, never."

"Nonsense!" said Constance, promptly. "Come on, Mr. Heath, let us go upstairs! I prescribe tea for us all."

He secured an opportunity on the staircase of whispering the communication he

had to make, and was rewarded by a bright smile.

"I am so glad! Now you must come and tell me all about the new book you are at work on. I have been terribly 'out of it!'" she said.

Christabel was not long in perceiving that the old state of cordiality between the two had been restored, and conversation speedily took a more lively turn.

"I am absolutely ashamed of myself," she declared, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief; "I wouldn't have Marion know what a goose I have been for anything! Frank, you ought to have shaken me."

"You were shaken enough, I fancy," he returned. "Never mind, Chris, you and I will be the old maid and old bachelor of the family, and sit opposite each other of a wintry evening on the Hampstead hearth!"

"And in the summer," said Chris, "we can try the Hampstead Heath."

"This evening, however," observed Constance, "you will try neither! I foresaw that we should be the least bit in the world melancholy after the affair was over, and so I took a box for the new comedy at the Court. We shall all be made to laugh, and it will do us an immensity of good."

Christabel clapped her hands.

"What ideas you have, Mrs. Bouverie! You are a perfect genius," she exclaimed. "It is exactly the plan I would have chosen. What time does it begin?"

"Not till nine. But I really don't think you need take the trouble to go back and change your things. Your bridesmaid's dress is charming, and you can leave your hat here till we return."

"Return?" echoed Frank. "Is Curzon Street not to be rid of us even then?"

“We shall certainly want some supper,” said Constance, “and I hoped we should have it here. If I may venture to prophesy, Mr. Heath, your sister will eat little more at dinner than she did at the breakfast, and our mayonnaise and champagne after the theatre, and perhaps a sweet omelette to follow, will really be the first meal to-day that we shall any of us enjoy. Dare you yourself applaud a comedy in a frock coat—that is the question?”

“If you will permit me, I can be back here in black and white in an hour,” answered Frank.

So it was settled that they should dine in Curzon Street, and proceed together afterwards to the play, and meanwhile the young man went off in a cab to make his toilet.

Constance improved the occasion of his absence by leading the girl on to talk of Edgar Stirling, with the result that she arrived at the

conclusion that the matter was more serious than she had at first supposed. Not that the other went into details, but her voice and eyes were eloquent enough to the perception of a woman of the world. Frank's laughing picture of a future in which he and she should spend their lives together in single blessedness could scarcely have commended itself to his sister's mind, Mrs. Bouverie concluded, with a mental smile.

Frank reached the lodgings, and was met in the passage by the landlady, beaming, and eager for intelligence.

"Is she married, Mr. 'Eath?" she exclaimed. "Is the dear married? And, oh, Mr. 'Eath, 'ow did she bear up?—noble, I'll be bound; didn't she now?"

"Well, she was fairly fit," said Frank.

"Ah, I'll wager she was! And no one, mind you, who hasn't been through it knows what an ideal the marriage service is—it's a horful ideal!

What with one thing and another, a poor gal don't so much as know which end she's on by the time she gets to the halter. And was the breakfast nice, Mr. 'Eath ? ”

“The breakfast was first rate,” answered Frank.

“My word, I'll be bound it was—quite West End, I've no manner of doubt ! Ah, I do love to see a good wedding, and a good funeral ! Economize if you're poor—it's fit and proper that you should—but don't stint at them times ; that's what I always say ! A wedding and a funeral behove you to do your best—don't they, Mr. 'Eath ? And the neighbours, so to speak, expect it ! ”

He hurried into evening dress, and was at Mrs. Bouverie's again in a little more than the hour that he had boasted would suffice. Dinner over, they drove to Sloane Square, and then back to a cheery little supper that was prolonged until after one o'clock. A hansom

deposited Chrissie and Frank at their doorstep as the clock of a church in the vicinity was striking two, and the excitements of an eventful day were soon forgotten in sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK HEATH had not forgotten Mrs. Benson's cordiality. On the contrary, he had put in an appearance at more than one of her "At Homes," where he drank the lukewarm tea one always gets on these occasions, and flattered himself that he had effaced any unfavourable impression that their earliest meeting might have left upon the mind of Miss Dolly.

He was beginning to perceive that he was a good deal interested by Miss Dolly. Her blue eyes had come between him and his paper very frequently of late, and when he

called at Portman Square he was always conscious of a sensation which he was reluctant to define.

It is not the most agreeable of mental exercises for a young gentleman who has been vowing himself eternally the slave of a charming woman to discover that he is falling in love with someone else, and Mr. Heath pooh-poohed this rather humiliating sensation for some time. He called it, for instance, by other names : the hackneyed alias of "friendship" serving him for quite a month. But love, like murder, "will out"—and far more surely—and there came a day when he was forced in his self-communions to admit the truth.

He was in love with Dolly Benson ! Really it sounded very odd to him. In love—and no longer with Constance Bouverie ! It was extraordinary.

Then came reflections which were inevitable but brutal, in their *volte face*. His feeling for

Mrs. Bouverie had never been serious ; it was the folly of a boy—nothing more. He had met her at an impressionable age, and, as a natural consequence, exalted her into a goddess. Every man did make an idiot of himself in this way in his salad days. As a rule, he believed, the lady was almost old enough to be the idiot's grand-mamma ; and at least nobody could say that of Mrs. Bouverie. No, he was scarcely to be chaffed in the matter, ridiculous as he had been to wish to make her his wife. A handsome woman, nobody could deny it ; a deucedly handsome woman—though, of course, compared to the loveliness of Dolly, she *was*—eh ? Well, she wasn't quite so young as she had been, that certainly. And she lacked the—er—divine freshness of the other's youth. However, he need not feel ashamed of the object of his calf-love, and that was a good deal for a fellow to be able to say. She might have been a

barmaid. He lit a cigar, and blew a meditative cloud.

Did Miss Benson care for him?—the tenor of his reverie was no longer so complacent. He could dismiss the past—the old love—collectedly enough, but the future—the new one—made him restless. Did she—could she—like him a little? And what would Benson *père* say? He smoked furiously, and the ash fell in a lump on to the paper, over which he had written “Dolly,” instead of “Chapter XXII.”

He had not progressed very rapidly with his book during Jack and Marion’s wedding-tour, devoting at least three evenings a week to the enlivenment of Christabel; but when the happy pair returned to town he had begun to work regularly again, and by the time they were established in a house in South Street, the novel was within measurable distance of completion.

One morning Mr. Brocklebank spoke to him on the subject, questioning him as to the plot, and so forth.

"I liked your 'Career of Gerald Ingram' very well," he said. "Is this one that you have on the stocks upon the same lines?"

"Well, it is a story of modern life," Frank answered, flattered by the unwonted notice from his chief; "personally, I think it is an improvement on the other."

"It is quite healthy, I suppose—no 'social problems' and that kind of thing, Heath?"

"Oh, no! nothing of the sort. The interest, such as it is, is perfectly innocent."

"You might let me have a look at what you've done," said the editor. "If it suits, we may be able to run it through the paper for you before you arrange for the book-rights. You would get something for serial publication that way, apart from the prestige of its appearance in the *Hyde Park*."

"I should be delighted. It is extremely kind of you to make the offer."

The expression on Mr. Brocklebank's pink face implied that he knew it was.

"Well, bring the MS. down with you to-morrow, and leave it in my room," he said. "I'll glance through it during the week."

On reflection, however, Frank was in a little doubt whether Mr. Benson would regard the publication of a book by himself with quite so favourable an eye if it had appeared in print already. It all depended what position he was regarded as having made. For a novelist of standing the proceeding was entirely regular, but from a minor light a publisher might not unnaturally prefer to receive a work that was absolutely new. He resolved to put the matter to him as soon as Mr. Brocklebank had signified his approval.

This Mr. Brocklebank did about a fortnight later.

"Oh, by the way, that story of yours is all right, Heath," he remarked, in passing through the office. "What length will it run to?"

Frank explained.

"And you'll have it done by——"

"This is June—say September."

"Well, I'll let you know what we can offer you. It is very pleasant reading."

The author, who had looked for a more enthusiastic comment, bowed his gratitude; and the editor, who wanted a good serial cheap, rubbed his hands in approval of his own philanthropy.

"I am happy to tell you I have been able to do our young friend a service," he wrote in a little note to Constance the same day; and Constance, in thanking him, begged him to dine at Curzon Street the following week. So certain is it that a generous action does not go unrewarded, though pessimists would tell us a different tale.

Frank interviewed his publisher at the first opportunity, and was relieved to find him agreeable to the proposal.

"That's all right, my boy," he said—"that's all right! How is it we haven't seen anything of you at the Square of late? Mrs. Benson was immensely taken with your voice that night—done nothing but talk about it ever since. And how is the book going?"

"I expect to have it done by September," replied Frank, "or, perhaps, the middle of August. If they print fairly long instalments in the *Hyde Park*, it could be out in volume form by the beginning of the year."

"Ah, you young authors," said Mr. Benson, facetiously; "you young authors, always so eager for the fray! By the way, have you anything to do on Sunday? Mrs. Benson has taken a place up the river for the next few months. If you have no engagement——"

Frank responded cordially: "I should be awfully pleased, indeed!"

"'Awfully, pleased, indeed,' from a literary man! Degenerate days, Mr. Heath—degenerate days! Well, then, we may hope to see you! Come early. But 'Awfully pleased, indeed'? Can you for a moment imagine Dr. Johnson's feelings if he had been answered so? Suppose, when the great lexicographer had said, 'Sir, let us take a walk down Fleet Street,' Boswell had replied, 'Awf'ly pleased, indeed, Doctor!' what would Johnson have thought, what would that great mind have endured?"

"I really don't think it matters much," said Frank, lightly, "what his great mind would have endured. Dr. Johnson was a very rude old man!"

Mr. Benson held up his hands in mock horror at this audacity, and Frank gaily bade him adieu. Well, he could accept Mr. Brocklebank's offer now, and he was invited to pass a whole

day in the society of Dolly. Things were going well with him ! On the strength of it, he went home in a hansom, and took Chrissie to Olympia to dinner.

He had not gone so much to Curzon Street as Constance had expected him to do after their whispered understanding on the staircase. She was a little hurt at the fact, but attributed it to a feeling of embarrassment, not perhaps surprising under the circumstances, and when the note from Mr. Brocklebank reached her, she dispatched a line to Hampstead, congratulating the author, and asking him cordially to come round, and "tell her all about it."

He found it on the breakfast-table the morning after his visit to Mr. Benson.

"From Mrs. Bouverie, isn't it?" asked Christabel. He threw it across to her.

"Yes," he said. "I'll call this afternoon when I leave the office, so you will know where I am if I'm late."

"But you mustn't be late," said the girl; "we're dining with Marion and Jack this evening."

"Oh, by Jove, so we are; I'd forgotten all about it. Well, I'll just look in at Curzon Street on my way back, and be home in time to dress."

Chrissie noted, what the speaker was unconscious of, the composure with which he had renounced the prospect of an hour or two spent in Mrs. Bouverie's company; and she drew deductions. Awhile ago, she remembered, it would have taken many dinner-parties, rare as they were then, to make him forego the pleasure he waived so easily to-day.

Constance could not but vaguely perceive something of the kind herself next afternoon. Not that the young man showed no gratitude now for all that she had done for him, or that he had ceased to feel it—Frank Heath bore no more resemblance to a cad than everybody

would bear if all our thoughts were described through the unsympathetic medium of printer's ink—but there was a change in his manner towards her notwithstanding. True, she had desired a change, begged him to make it, and insisted, as much to herself as to him, that she rejoiced when it was made, but the fact remained that it pained her to remark it now.

She inquired about his plans, his movements, and was aware of a restraint in his replies. The spontaneity, the eagerness of delight in answering her, was gone.

"It is a very good thing for you, this offer from your editor, isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," he said, "it is excellent."

But he did not burst into a torrent of particulars, as he would have done once. He struck her as older, more formal.

"I am very glad of it indeed," he continued, as if he felt the baldness of his response himself; "it is first rate to have the story through a

paper like the *Hyde Park*. It is another thing I owe to you, Mrs. Bouverie; but for your introducing me to Mr. Brocklebank's notice it would never have happened."

"Oh," she murmured, "that is nothing!" Lacking their old enthusiasm, his thanks hurt her more than she chose to admit.

She wondered suddenly whether this alteration, this semblance of formality, might not be affected to conceal the love that she had bade him banish, and which had proved too strong for his attempt. Was that the explanation? It was possible! In truth she had been rather dull not to think of it before. Poor boy! he had tried and failed, and, though he could not obey her, he was simulating success. He had pretended—and so well, too, that she had been taken in! Without knowing it, she smiled, and her eyes were softer as she looked at him. Frank at the same moment was thinking how she aged. "Were those crow's-feet he could see

as she lifted her head ?” She smiled. “And that awful line about her mouth !”

“Well,” he said, “I must run away ; I’ve got to dine at Marion’s to-night.”

CHAPTER X.

THE Bensons had taken a very much larger house than they required, but it was charming in the extreme, and the lawn sloped to the edge of the river, and the ladies had fallen a prey to its attractions.

It, was built in two stories, with a square hall overlooked by a gallery, and a dining-room pavilion-shaped, opening upon the grounds.

When Frank arrived next Sunday, Mr. Benson was in the garden, smoking, and reading the papers, and the others welcomed him a moment later.

"We were going to send the dog-cart to the station," said Mrs. Benson; "but my husband told me he was so thoughtless as not to inquire by which train you would come."

Frank declared that he had found the short walk enjoyable, and congratulated her upon her acquisition.

"It is pretty, isn't it?" she said; "I fell in love with it at first sight. It hasn't any of the inconveniences one so often gets up the river, and as we shall be living here altogether after next month—at least for a time—we took it, though it is far too big. Archie, give Mr. Heath something to drink."

The young man protested perfunctorily, but quaffed claret-cup under the cedar, and was induced to light a cigarette.

Dolly was wearing an embroidered muslin, with a wide-brimmed hat, and a cluster of roses at her throat. He thought he had never seen

her look more bewitching, or found parents more *de trop*.

“It is delicious!” he said, leaning back in the deck-chair, where he could gaze his fill upon the delicate face; “and you are far enough up to escape the Cockney element.”

“Yes, we don’t see a great deal of that,” said Miss Benson, “though we are sometimes touched by it even here, ’Arry is ubiquitous. That is why we seldom go on the water on Sundays.”

“But we must to-day,” her mother added: “the backwater will be delightful after luncheon, and Mr. Heath shall shoot the oak!”

“Oh, yes,” exclaimed Dolly, “you shall take us out in the canoe and shoot the oak, Mr. Heath! There’s a wretch of an oak in the way, and if you get us through at the third time of trying, you’ll be clever. You won’t capsize us?”

"I'll do my best to avoid it," he answered her; and their eyes met for an instant, and he fancied he could read in Dolly's that she knew she would be safe with *him* anywhere.

"Are you on the water much?" he asked.

"I live on it!" she answered; "I punt up to the backwater directly after breakfast, and stay there all the morning, reading, or dabbling with my brushes. I'll show you some of my 'works of art' presently, and then after luncheon you shall see if you are able to recognize any of the spots."

Mr. Benson laughed.

"Poor Heath! and if he can't, you'll never forgive him!"

"May I see some of the sketches now?" Frank begged.

"I'll go and get them if you really mean it," she said, gaily; "but—I warn you—I'm an

amateur; I've no doubt they're as wrong as they can be !”

She vanished into the house, and reappeared in a few minutes at the windows of the morning-room, shaking her head.

“ They are too bad,” she called ; “ I’m bashful ! ”

“ Oh, but—”

“ I couldn’t,” she repeated, “ you’d make fun of them ! ”

“ May I go and look, Mrs. Benson ? ”

“ Do,” she returned ; “ really, I think she has talent, only she has never been properly taught. It’s a pity.”

He joined the girl on the verandah. She stood with a sketch held behind her back, in sham defiance.

“ Your mother says you are to show me,” he said.

“ Couldn’t,” said Dolly ; “ I tell you I’m shy.”

" But I'm not a critic, you know ; why should you be afraid of me ? "

" You're a professional, anyhow ; and professionals always hate an amateur. "

" Then I'm not a professional ! "

She looked conscious, and away.

" Do let me," he petitioned ; " Miss Benson, how can you be so unkind ? "

Through the curtains of the open window he saw a portfolio lying on a chair.

" Let me see some of those in the room ? " he said.

" In there ? "

" Yes. "

" You won't sneer ? "

" I promise, indeed. "

" Or think me silly ? "

" How can you imagine such things of me ! Oh, Miss Benson, *please* ! "

" Very well," she said ; " you may go in, and look. "

"But you are going to show them to me, aren't you? I couldn't go in alone."

"Why not?"

"I suffer from your complaint—I'm shy."

She heaved a sigh of resignation: "Well, come along, then! You're horribly persistent!"

They went into the room together, and she passed him the sketches—little, futile, fifth-form follies—one by one. He found them exquisite, and said so. "I'd give anything to paint half as well!" he exclaimed; "I'd rather be a painter than anything. I should like to be a portrait painter, Miss Benson, and ask you to sit to me in that gown and hat."

"These old things?" she murmured.

"You look——" he hovered between "a picture" and "adorable," and risked "adorable." Her lashes dropped.

"Now we'll go back," she suggested.

"Must we—at once? I have such a lot to

talk to you about, and I never get the chance. Do you remember the evening you sang? I was brimful of things to say to you when I crossed over to you the second time, and when I reached you, somehow they all went."

"I know," she smiled.

"Did you think me an awful duffer? I hated myself for a week afterwards, fearing that you must! Did you?"

"You see you had talked to me already," she said. "No, I was not so rude."

"I was really silent because I wanted to say so much. What was it you did think?"

"'Think'?"

"Why did you suppose I was so stupid?"

"I didn't—oh, we must really go back, Mr. Heath!"

"Tell me!" he begged; "tell me first!"

"Well, I fancied it might be—what a wickedly

obstinate man you are—I fancied it might be because you thought me nice !”

She flashed a glance at him from under the big hat that set all the blood tingling in his veins, and sped out into the garden with a bewildering laugh.

“Mr. Heath advises me to exhibit,” she cried ; “he says I’m a genius !”

“Seriously, though, Mr. Heath, they are not bad, are they ?” said her mother. “Did you show him the sketch of the summer-house, Dolly, with Mortimer crossing the lawn with tea ?”

“I displayed the whole collection, and Mr. Heath is the most amiable of critics !”

“Do as you would be done by, eh, Heath ?” said Mr. Benson. “Well, you’ve nothing to complain of at your reviewers’ hands ! Isn’t lunch ready yet, Helen, my dear ? I’m perfectly ravenous.”

Mrs. Benson, who was no better informed on

the subject than he was himself, playfully intimated as much ; but a footman approached them as she spoke, and she rose and led the way with Frank into the house.

Men have an advantage over women in so much that in all stages of love fever, save the most virulent, they can still appreciate the triumphs of the *cuisine*. And, fortunately for those amongst them with the right memberships or friends, the most virulent form is rare. Frank had learnt to know what should be expected of a *chef* who earns his salary, in the course of many dinners in Curzon Street ; but he was forced to admit that Constance herself might have been gratified to see such a luncheon in her house as was now discussed at the Bensons'. The wines, too, were superb, and after flirting with hock, and proving constant to champagne, he foresaw that if he secured another *tête-à-tête* with Miss Dolly, his cause would hardly suffer from taciturnity this afternoon. That laugh

with which she had run away from him rang through his consciousness still. Was she playing with him, or did she mean anything by it? How her eyes had sparkled as she said, "I fancied it might be because you thought me nice!" And now she was sitting opposite him eating strawberries as demurely as if she could not say "Bo!" to a goose. But she could; she had said "Bo!" to *him*. Yes, he *was* a goose, a mutton-head, for not having caught her hand, and detained her. She had given him encouragement enough. (The butler was at his chair, and his glass foamed afresh.) Gad, if he were alone with her once more! He loved her; why should he not tell her so? How good it would be to feel her in his arms, and kiss her! —the strawberries were not so red as the lips that opened for them! He watched the white fingers lift one from her plate; she dipped it in the sugar, in the cream, she raised it to her mouth. Ah, strawberry, thrice blessed! (More

champagne? Certainly; why not?) Perhaps there might be an opportunity later. He had met her—how many times now? Well, not so very often: but one man may do in a month as much as another in a year. Luncheon was over. Coffee and cigars under the cedar next. Excellent programme! How enjoyable it all was! These Bensons understood the art of living! There was a dog; where had it come from? Ah, *her* dog, a pet of Dolly's! Pretty little fellow! he would caress it, though he hated lap-dogs, and was always afraid that they would bite him. A gift, she said, upon her birthday. "From your mother?" "No; a friend." A "friend!" A lover, doubtless,—a detested rival! He wished the little beast at the bottom of the river, and regretted he had risked a bite.

She could read his dread, he knew it, and he found malice in her gay indifference. Yes; it was malicious. She sported with his tenderest

feelings. He suffered agreeably ; and, filtering the smoke of the Partaga through his nose, affected a carelessness to match her own.

Then other people arrived—some uninteresting married woman and her obnoxious brother. What a nuisance—they were to stay to dinner ! The brother—he was introduced as Captain somebody—paid attentions to Dolly, and she did not repulse him. Was she a coquette ? They all went on the water ; but Frank took Mrs. Benson in the punt, and Dolly was skulled by the Captain. A dull hour and a half, and he could not help a glance, withering in its severity, when they landed. SC

Come ! he would flirt with the married woman, and retaliate. Everybody strolled about the garden pending tea, and he put the plan into execution forthwith. The married one was not averse to a little mild flirtation, and he was happy to perceive that Miss Benson looked

scornful. He laughed loudly, to convey the idea of much enjoyment in the colloquy; and, as nothing particular had been said at the moment, the married woman concluded she had been witty by accident, and wished she knew what joke it was that she had made.

There was quite a haughty expression on Miss Benson's face by the time the tea was brought out, and when she offered him cake and biscuits it was with a cold, proud, non-seeing gaze that cut him to the heart. He declined both, gravely, feeling, as an artist, that at such a crisis the bathos of biscuit and banality of Buszard were a descent.

But it was a cloud in an April sky. During dinner his resentment thawed. With the sherry and soup it occurred to him that her guilt was not unpardonable; *dinde farcie aux truffes*, with the popping of champagne-corks, found him debating whether it might not be pardoned

now ; and *crème au Kummel* saw him kind. He addressed her ; and she answered softly. They served ambrosia and nectar for dessert ; and presently there was music in the drawing-room, while he turned over the leaves of her song.

The room was hot, and the French windows were open. There was a hum of conversation within, but he did not notice it, for they were on the verandah again, he and she ; and in her return to gentleness she was intoxicating. He told her he must bid her “ Good night,” but did not do it.

“ Why have you been so cruel ^{to} me ? ” he asked instead.

“ I ? ”

“ You, Miss Benson ! ”

“ I am sure you seemed sufficiently amused by—others. I did not know you wished to talk to me.”

“ But Fido—a present ! And you saw—”

"Poor little doggie—from an old school-fellow. And what of him?"

"Oh, forgive me!" he entreated.

The yellow river quivered under the moon, and the magic of her presence was in his pulses. He drew nearer to her. "Can you," he urged, "will you give me one of those roses you are wearing, as a token?"

"As a token?"

"Of forgiveness that I don't deserve."

Inside, somebody strummed a German valse, and her mother's voice was heard asking her to sing to them again.

"Give it to me first," he whispered.

She hesitated, while he watched her, shakingly. Her fingers crept up, and she silently detached the flower. "There!" He pressed it to his lips with the hand that held it. "I will keep it all my life," he vowed, and they went back to the room. But he did not see it. The yielding hand had trembled under his kiss; she had

given him a flower. It was no drawing-room he entered, but Paradise ; no piano, tinkled by the futile Captain, that he heard—it was the melody of a Celestial choir.

CHAPTER XI.

“THE devil’s in the moon for mischief”—we have it upon good authority, and most of us have verified the observation by experience. Frank travelled up to town that night with his head in a whirl, and frenzied by the intention of proposing to Dolly Benson at their next meeting. What an angel! and to think he might actually have lived through a wasted lifetime without seeing her! Thank Heaven, all the other publishers had rejected his book! If it had been accepted earlier than it was—. His equanimity was shaken by the thought!

Certainly her parents might not be exuberantly joyful to give her to him ; they had doubtless looked to see her marry a man in a better position than his. But, on the other hand, his income would increase every year—especially when his publisher was his own father-in-law—and they had a liking for him, it was plain. She was the only child, and obviously indulged to the fullest extent. No, on the whole, he did not think they would refuse her heart's desire, and make him the most miserable of created beings, from any such sordid motive as pounds, shillings, and pence. Benson might hum and haw a little, or even stand out for a month or two ; but when Dolly lost her colour, and her appetite, and spirits, and his new novel made a perfect *furor*, as of course it would, papa would relent, and say “ Bless you, my children ! ” as amiably as the moneyed uncle at the end of a farce. And then Dolly, with those lovely blue eyes, would be his wife ! Oh, rapture, and joy

ineffable ! He could not sit still ; the narrow limits of a railway-compartment cooped him. He uttered a gasp of relief when the Waterloo platform was gained, and walked all the way home to Hampstead as the only possible outlet for his excitement.

Chrissie, he was rather surprised to find, was sitting up for him. He was too engrossed with private matters to be immediately observant, or he might have remarked that his sister appeared disturbed.

"Hallo," he said ; "how is it you aren't in bed ? It must be late ; I've tramped it from Waterloo."

Emphatically she was disturbed, for she failed to comment on this idiotic proceeding.

"I was at church this evening," she said ;
"Mr. Stirling preached."

"Oh ? Well, he didn't preach till this time of night, did he ?"

The volatile Chrissie looked grieved.

"Don't be flippant, Frank, on the subject of religion, even though you mean no harm by it ! It hurts me."

"What's wrong?" he demanded, with a stare. "You aren't yourself."

"I hope I am," she said ; "I hope I am the newer and better self to which I am awakened. I trust by degrees to improve still more—to be more earnest and worthy than I have been."

"Is this 'Stirling,'" inquired Frank, "or spoof?"

He was amazed to see her cover her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

"What is it, Chris?" he exclaimed affectionately. "What's the matter, child? Tell me!"

"Oh, Frank," she sobbed, "I am engaged—and I want to be a better girl—and—oh, I am happier than I know how to say!"

"To Edgar Stirling?"

"Yes, to Edgar! He loves me, he told me so after service. How can I be worthy of him? I want to fit myself to be his wife. Oh, I love him with all my heart!"

He stroked her hair with fraternal clumsiness, and stammered consolation.

"I expect Stirling thinks you are pretty good enough to be his wife already, Chris! I do, at all events; you're a trump, if ever there was one. And so you are engaged, eh? Well, that's nothing to cry for, that I can see; come, dry your eyes, and tell me all about it. When do you reckon to marry?"

"Not for years and years," she said, forlornly; "He told me he couldn't ask me, because he was so poor."

"Oh, he told you he couldn't ask you?"

"Yes, and I said he was to. And he did! But it will be years, Frank, years!"

"Well, in that case you will have plenty of

time to improve in," he said ; " but I daresay it will be a trifle sooner. So you're going to be the wife of a clergyman? I always thought that that was more likely to be the destiny of Marion. How funnily things turn out ! "

" I shall be just as serious as anybody," she declared, with a smile ; " you won't know me when "—she blushed—" when I'm ' Mrs. Edgar Stirling ' ! "

" I hope I shall ! Don't go and change too much, Chrissie, or you'll be making a mistake. Stirling has fallen in love with you as you are, remember ; he won't want his wife to turn out to be somebody else."

" Well, there's something in that," she admitted. " And you wouldn't call me ' worldly,' would you? I should hate to think I was ' worldly,' Frank, more than ever now."

" You're a jolly little trump," he repeated, with

conviction, "and you'll be an unqualified success, take my word for it. All the poor people in the village swore by you at home, recollect! Don't go and wear a poke bonnet, and dress in drab, there's a dear. You can do just as much good in a frock that's pretty."

"We shall have to be very, *very* economical," she said, proudly, "and there won't be any money to waste on pretty frocks, Master Frank. But flowers are cheap—I can promise you to wear a flower. Marion doesn't know yet; won't she be glad to hear the news! How did you enjoy yourself?" she asked, descending from Olympus.

He laughed. "You've 'come back'!" he said.

"Yes, I've 'come back.' Was it a pleasant day?"

"What would you say if I told you that perhaps, if I am very, bewilderingly fortunate, there may be another engagement in the family before long?"

“No! Not—?”

“I am in love with Miss Benson, Chrissie, and—. Well, I hope!”

“Oh, Frank! And is she nice?”

“She—” Words failed him. “Wait till you see her,” he responded.

Who would seek slumber under circumstances like these? Throw up the windows and let the starlight in—the soft, sweet breeze fragrant with the freshness of the Heath! Who would have oblivion, when memory was so exquisite to both! The brother and sister sat communing—dwelling together on the present, painting bright pictures of the future—until the sky was lightened by the break of day. The tobacco that was consumed, the visions that were seen, in that long conference! Chrissie was a parson’s wife, and Frank was married to Dolly, and earning his five thousand a year, before they separated.

“Oh,” said Christabel, rising at last, “I

can't keep my eyes open another minute!" But it was as much the glories they had looked upon that blinded them as sleep, and she, like him, felt that the hours had been well spent.

The next evening the Curate had a conversation with his *fiancée's* brother.

"I hope you don't blame me," he said, in his clear, candid voice; "perhaps I ought never to have spoken, but my love for your sister was stronger than my self-restraint."

"My dear fellow," answered Frank, "I don't know any man I'd be more glad to give her to. I'm in very much the same boat as you are myself. We're none of us rolling in wealth, but we're all three young enough to be able to afford to wait."

Stirling put out his hand, and there was a hearty grasp between the two.

"It's awfully good of you," he said, "and—well, I appreciate the way you have met me! I

shall do everything in my power to obtain a small living, and—you won't think me conceited to say it—I am confident I can make Christabel happy when I win her. I can't tell you how dear she is to me, or how tenderly I will shield and guard her."

"I understand ; and I am sure she'll never have cause to regret the step. She has rather the fear herself that she isn't sedate enough for the dignity in store for her."

Stirling laughed.

"Poor little woman ! What can have put such an idea into her head ?"

Frank suggested a *tête-à-tête* for him to endeavour to remove it, and the other agreed that it might be advisable. As the *tête-à-tête* was prolonged for upward of an hour, however, it is to be concluded that the idea was more deeply rooted than might have been assumed from the girl's bashful and radiant face at its conclusion.

Of course Marion could not but be pleased by the intelligence, for she had long been aware that they were fond of each other, but it was impossible also that she could avoid wishing that they had brighter prospects. She and Chrissie had spent the whole of the afternoon together in South Street, discussing the matter, and after the latter had gone—indeed about the same time that the *tête-à-tête* was in progress—she said to her husband,—

“I say, Jack, you haven’t any interest in the Church, have you? None of your connections, or anybody, with a living at his disposal?”

“How?” inquired Jack, struggling into his overcoat—they were going out to dinner.

“Chrissie’s engaged—to Mr. Stirling. And they can’t marry till goodness knows when. I don’t suppose his Curacy means seventy pounds a year.”

“Oh, by Jove! What awfully hard lines!” said Jack. “No, I’m sorry to say I don’t

—let me see—no, I don't know a soul who could pull any wires in that way. I wish I did !”

“ Well,” sighed Marion, “ I thought perhaps you might, but, as you don't, they must be satisfied to wait, that's all ! To do them justice, they *are* satisfied ; I've been cuddling and congratulating Chrissie ever since luncheon, and she is as gay as a lark over it. But I should have liked to see her married tolerably soon ! I hear that Frank is hovering on the verge of matrimony, and if he topples over, she'll be left all by herself.”

“ What do you mean ? I suppose you could find her a spare room with us, couldn't you ? ‘ Left by herself ’ ; what nonsense ! I wouldn't allow it ! ”

“ Humph ! ” said Marion, musingly. “ That's very nice of you, of course, and no doubt it's the way it would end, but do you quite think this house, and all the luxury you give me,

would be the best preparation for a life in some dreary little town on a possible hundred-and-fifty a year? You men, none of you, see any further than your noses."

The brougham was at the door, and her maid came in with her cloak.

"No," she resumed, as they drove along, "I should like to see Chris married quickly, bless her! They won't be rich, but I'm sure they'll always be lovers, Jack, as *we* are."

"Darling!" returned Jack, squeezing the little grey-gloved hand she had laid upon his knee. "Did you say your brother was engaged as well? To whom?"

"Not engaged, but hoping to be. She's a Miss Benson—Bensons the publishers."

"Is she? Lots of tin, eh?"

"Oh, Frank wouldn't consider that, dear, I know."

"No, I daresay he wouldn't, but it'll be nice for her to have it, all the same. You do look

beautiful this evening, Marion ! I wish I could kiss you ! ”

“ Wretch,” she murmured, “ and disarrange me ! Besides, the people can see in quite plainly ; somebody we passed stared in at us just now. Who was it ?—someone I’ve met ! ”

It had, in point of fact, been Richard Mansell. And he knew—though she did not—as the brougham sped by, that he had let his chance of winning the only woman he could have really loved escape him, while he pursued a will-o’-the-wisp which had escaped him too.

CHAPTER XII.

CONSTANCE did not long continue ignorant of her dethronement, for Chrissie, in communicating the news of her engagement to her, also alluded to Frank's *affaire du cœur*. It was a shock, but Mrs. Bouverie did not show it. She listened to such particulars as the other was able to give, with an interested smile, and inquired what his *inamorata* was like.

"I can't say," said Chrissie; "his tone suggested she was a goddess, but I've never seen her. By the way, I was told in rather a burst of confidence; I don't know whether I was supposed to mention it."

"I understand," responded Constance; "no doubt we shall all hear something definite presently; until we do, I will be discretion itself! But about yourself, dear; the outlook isn't quite all it might be, I gather? Mr. Stirling, you tell me, has little or no influence?"

"No," Christabel acknowledged; "it will be a long engagement, we may be sure, but we're very, very fond of each other, Mrs. Bouverie, and we are prepared to put up with a good many things."

"I know you are," said Constance. "I've suspected it a long time! Indeed, I saw Mr. Stirling was fond of you as far back as the evening of your party, when your landlady made you those wonderful ice creams. And so you are willing to be very poor, child, and live on bread-and-butter and kisses!"

"Is it very shocking?" asked Chris, demurely. "It won't be a very terrible sacrifice,

you see, because I'm not living in splendour and Mayfair now."

Mrs. Bouverie patted her cheek.

"I admire you for it, on the contrary, though it's a horribly unpractical thing to say! I want you to bring Mr. Stirling to dine here one night this week, and we'll ask Marion and her husband, and have a cosy, family gathering. I suppose your brother is too much occupied with 'Her' just now to care about accepting," she added, "but we'll hope to secure Mr. Frank Heath as well."

After the *fiancée* had left her, she mused; not only on the story she had heard of Frank, but of what she might do to further the happiness of the girl herself. As has been said, it had always been her aim to find good husbands for both Frank's sisters, and with the elder she had certainly succeeded. Christabel had frustrated her intention, by meeting an excellent fellow without her introduction; but, though

she could now do nothing towards marrying her to someone else, it was evident that she might do much towards marrying her to *him*.

She had been chary of hinting her thought to her visitor, fearing lest she might be over-estimating her ability in the direction, and knowing, moreover, that matters like this were not to be arranged in a few weeks, even with the heartiest of co-operation. Now, whom did she know who could serve her here? Above all, who would be likely to co-operate heartily?

A name occurred to her instantly: Lord Whichelo! Lord Whichelo could put Stirling into a living, and a capital one; and Lord Whichelo admired her as ardently as the gout and a wife twenty years his senior would let him.

Who else? Two or three people crossed her mind. She would speak to them all, but Whichelo first—because she was a very exceptional woman. She was exceptional, insomuch

as when she endeavoured to do anything for a friend, she always tried to do something first-rate. You will find very, very few persons think of attempting this, although it may cost them no more trouble than to do something very mediocre indeed. There is an explanation of the circumstance, but no space to set it forth.

On reflection she remembered that the following evening she was due in Lowndes Square, and that—the gout permitting—it was likely the peer in question would be present. She therefore decided to postpone addressing him by letter until afterwards, and determined to be especially gracious if they met. The fates were kind, and he took her down to dinner.

“How long,” he said, “how long is it since I have had this pleasure, Mrs. Bouverie?”

“It must be an age—six months!” she returned, knowing full well it wasn’t. “You have refused at least three of my invitations.”

"You remind me of my infirmities," murmured Lord Whichelo; "and a moment ago you had made me forget them!"

"Dear Lady Whichelo is well, I hope?"

"I hope so. She is at Vichy, and I have not heard for some days. She was ailing when she left."

Constance expressed sympathy, but did not as yet broach the subject that engrossed her. It was an hour later when she touched upon it, and the peer was sipping port, and defying his physician.

"By the way, Lord Whichelo," she said, "I have a petition to present to you. I want you to do something for me."

He bowed blandly; "I am happy—and it is done, Mrs. Bouverie."

"Well, I hope you will say so in five minutes' time! Because I have set my heart on the scheme, and if you raise difficulties you'll disappoint me frantically. You have a living at

your disposal, I think,—in Devonshire, isn't it ? somewhere charming, I know—and *I*, on the other hand, have a very charming girl-friend, whom I'm immensely fond of."

Her companion was understood to say that the young lady was to be envied this bliss.

"Now, as charming girls have a habit of doing, she has become engaged," continued Constance, "and the lucky man is a Mr. Edgar Stirling ; a curate, with really brilliant attainments. I am dying to get him into a living at once, and, of all livings in England, I want yours. Will you do me a tremendous 'turn,' and let me write my friend that you are the nicest and most amiable man of my acquaintance ? "

"My dear Mrs. Bouverie," Lord Whichelo raised a white hand to signify desolation, "if I only could ! "

"You can't ? "

"To be written down the nicest man you know ! And it is impossible !"

"Oh, Lord Whichelo !"

" ' Lauriston ' has at present an incumbent, I am sorry to say. I am in despair. If it were vacant, I need not say it should be yours for the asking. But what can I do ?"

Nothing, Constance was forced to acknowledge it ; and she counted her evening a failure, though she was the most beautiful woman in the rooms, and knew the frock she wore to be a masterpiece of art.

But she was far from giving up the project, and during the next week or two she attempted to attain it elsewhere. It was not a plan easy of fulfilment, for town was already beginning to thin, and those persons whom she contrived to approach proved in no better position to assist her than Whichelo himself.

Nevertheless she was determined to succeed sooner or later, and, though she must now

moderate her expectations, since "Lauriston" was not vacant, she would still put Edgar Stirling into *something*. Even if it were only three or four hundred a year, it would enable Christabel and him to marry ; indeed, she did not suppose their own ideas mounted as high as that ! Her own—well, as before mentioned, she believed in giving as much as she could, and Whichelo had certainly disappointed her woefully. "Lauriston," and the attendant stipend, would have been a perfect poem !

Meanwhile Christabel, who had no suspicion that a fairy godmother was weaving spells for her behoof, was singing about the Hampstead lodgings as gaily as a lark. Marion herself had not looked at her betrothal-ring more rapturously than her sister gazed upon the little half-hoop of turquoises which typified her high estate. Miss Stirling had been more affectionate to the girl than ever since the engagement took place, and the two used to take their morning walk in

tender communion, through Church Row on to the Heath, and so on into the valley, or on under the trees, while the future formed an inexhaustible subject to them both.

And sometimes Chris came here with her lover to this tract of woodland in the city of bricks and mortar, and heartlessness and sin, and teeming, bustling humanity. And in the peace of it the man's anxieties were forgotten, for in the fairness of the summer's eve it seemed that a caress was on them from a protecting God. Only once he asked her if she had any regret for the waiting to which she had pledged herself ; if she was sorry.

"Dearest," he said, "if it is years before I can make you my wife—if it is years, sweetheart?"

"If it is years, Edgar," she answered, "we must be brave, and not mind too much. Dear one, remember, there will be more years for us together, hand-in-hand."

Twilight was descending, and wrapping the

scene in shadow. He took her in his arms, and kissed her on the brow, and filled with faith they wandered homeward through the silence.

They loved each other, and they hoped. Without love and hope what were life ! But of Constance's plot they had not a suspicion. She persevered with it in secret.

CHAPTER XIII.

FRANK continued his novel in a fever of suspense, waiting breathlessly for another invitation to the riverside Eden. When a month had worn away without any missive arriving, a thousand forebodings filled his mind. He argued that, if Dolly reciprocated the sentiment she had inspired, and had not been merely flirting with him, he would surely have had a note long ago. It was all very well to say that Mrs. Benson might not be cognizant of her feelings, but, if they were serious, the girl would undoubtedly have contrived to afford

him an opportunity of speaking to her, whether she chose to take her mother into her confidence or not. And there was another aspect to the case that terrified him. Perhaps her parents did know all about it, and had positively refused to sanction such a marriage! He now looked for a letter with the passionate eagerness which had distinguished him when "The Career of Gerald Ingram" was "making the round," and when a double knock came, and there were no results, his distress was pitiful.

He would have called, on the flimsiest of pretexts, at Mr. Benson's office, but no pretext, even the flimsiest, was forthcoming at this stage. Until the serial was appearing in the *Hyde Park*, there was absolutely nothing for him to go about. He could not present himself and say, "I can't understand why you haven't asked me to your place again." He could only wait, and watch the indifferent postman, who he vindictively vowed should have no

shilling from him at Christmas, not if the very pudding of the villain depended on it. Chrissie observing him hanging out of window as the time for the nine o'clock delivery drew nigh, and returning to his chair with a muttered anathema as the last rat-tat in the street had sounded, understood, and pitied his condition.

When August was verging on September, an inspiration came to the disconsolate lover. He did not receive a letter; should he write one? Might he not pour out his fervour on paper, and confess it in this way to Miss Benson's ear—or eye? The course, could he have foreseen events, would have been better adopted the day after their last interview, but even now it was better than to sit doing nothing! Yes, he would propose to her through the post. The notion exhilarated him, and he commenced to mentally compose his appeal at once.

Before the idea could be put into execution,

however, he had an explanation of the apparent slight that had been put upon him. He found himself one day next the worthy publisher on the top of a 'bus, and after the "how d'ye do," ensued conversation. Mrs. Benson had been unwell, he heard ; the river air had proved too relaxing for her, and she was on the Continent recouping. "And Miss Benson?" Miss Benson had accompanied her mother; they were expected back next month. The author was so delighted by the intelligence that it demanded an effort to appear properly sympathetic for the elder lady's indisposition.

"We should have hoped to see you before this, otherwise," said Mr. Benson ; "our place up the river has been standing deserted for six weeks now. We tried to get rid of it, but of course we couldn't."

"Awful nuisance!" responded Frank.

"Fortunately we only took it for three months certain, and our time's nearly up."

Questions followed as to the progress of the book, and then the publisher got down, and Frank continued his journey alone. An ugly city? A beautiful city! Its appearance was transfigured to him. Dolly was *not* heartless—her parents had *not* been obdurate! She was “the victim of circumstances,” like the falsely suspected sweethearts in the *Family Herald*. A dutiful daughter, taken to foreign shores while her “thoughts were elsewhere,” and cruelly misjudged by the adorer she left behind. In his relief at the discovery he forgot the point at which he had hailed the omnibus, and paid the conductor a penny too much.

He now finished the last chapters of the novel in high spirits, and took the completed manuscript in to Mr. Brocklebank the morning after he had written “The End.” Mr. Brocklebank held out hopes of printing the first instalment early in October, and in the meanwhile Frank thought he was entitled to be idle,

apart from his work for the *H.P.* Chrissie, who spent a good many of her evenings with the Stirlings since her engagement, was no longer so dependent on his home-coming for society, and he took to dining out, in little French and Italian restaurants round Soho, and to wandering about London afterwards with a cigar in his mouth, dreaming on the bridges, or under the trees in the parks.

One night when he returned, he saw an envelope on the mantelpiece addressed to him, and he uttered a cry of joy on perceiving that it bore the long-looked-for crest. Mrs. Benson was back in Portman Square. They were giving a dance and she trusted he would be able to come to it.

The date was a fortnight distant, so it was evidently a formal affair, but she wrote a little friendly note alluding to her recent illness, and saying how much she regretted not seeing him earlier, and reminding him of her next "At

Home" day, which was some time before the night fixed for the ball.

He answered in the morning, from the office, congratulating her on her recovery, and saying how glad he was to accept. In the luncheon-hour he went out and bought a basket of exotics, and sent the reply with the flowers, by hand. That evening, when it was quite dark, and there was no danger of his being observed from the windows, he took his walk in the direction of Portman Square, and strolled past the hallowed house, thrilled by the reflection that only a sheet of glass and a lace blind separated him from Dolly.

The 'At Home' day dawned all too slowly, for, though nothing decisive could be expected to occur on an occasion like that, would he not at least know the sweetness of her presence! His heart beat more quickly as he rang the bell, and was shown upstairs. Excitement, and the brilliance of many bonnets, blinded him

for an instant, but in the next he was responding to Mrs. Benson's greeting, and looking beyond her at the face he had been so hungry to see.

It smiled; and dazzled him. He had a tea-cup in his hand, but could not for the life of him say how it came there. He only knew he was in a low chair, with Dolly on the ottoman beside him, and that he was stumbling in the endeavour to tell her what a joy it was to speak to her again.

The delirium passed, and he began to be coherent, and to realize that there were words set to the music of her voice. She was asking him what he had been doing with himself since they met.

"Missing you!" he answered; "I began to think I was never going to see you any more."

She smiled again—this time an approving smile.

"How pretty! My mother was seedy, you know. It was perfectly lovely abroad."

"Lovely!" while he had suffered so! He looked his reproach.

"But I don't mind confessing I am glad to be home again, for all that," she added, gently. "And you have not been away this summer yourself?"

"No," he said. "No, I have not been away yet."

A newer arrival engaged her. He talked small-talk to someone he had been introduced to previously, with the tail of his eye on her. People went away; but he lingered as long as he dared, in the hope that she might return to the ottoman.

"I must go," he said, at length, crossing the room to her. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye. We shall see you on Wednesday?"

"Oh, indeed, yes, Miss Benson! May I

hope you will keep me two or three or four vales ? ”

“ ‘ Or three or four ! ’ ”

“ Is it too many ? ” he urged.

“ Let us say three. Will it content you ? ”

“ It will make me very grateful, at all events !
Thank you.”

“ Good-bye ! ” she murmured. “ Mother, Mr. Heath is going.”

He would have his arm about her waist ! That slim, unapproachable waist of hers—he was destined to clasp it ! Would Wednesday ever come to him, or would he die before such ecstasy was reached ? Each evening, after the fashion of the schoolboy in the last weeks of the term, he mentally ticked off another day that brought it nearer. He felt it was the crisis of his life that Wednesday held in store. In the small hours of Thursday morning he would be either the most blessed or the most miserable of men. The ball should be the scene of

his proposal, he was determined on it. Should he ask her before or after the last dance she had reserved for him? After it; for if she accepted him, she would be sure to give him another, and, if he were refused, he would not have lost anything! No details were too insignificant or absurd to occupy him now. He debated the colour of his "buttonhole," whether it should be pink or white, and if he should wear a fragile watch-chain across his waistcoat, or a fob-chain with a seal. In imagination he enacted the fateful interview a dozen times; each time the *mise en scène* was different, but the *dénouement* the same. He proposed on the balcony, in the hall, on the staircase. He was eloquent, irresistible; and her head sank on his breast, and she was his for ever.

The picture of her head sinking on his breast reminded him that he was by no means satisfied with the way the laundress glazed his

shirt-fronts, and he took steps to avoid any dependence on her services for this occasion. French laundresses over here might, or might not, ruin the linen in their efforts to secure the same effects with the London water as were obtainable in Paris. He did not know, and he did not care. For his part a dozen shirts might suffer, so long as his appearance did not. He repaired to Soho again with emphatic instructions and the bearing of a Monte Cristo.

And the sun rose on Wednesday! Nothing happened to prevent it. The sky did not fall. Nothing untoward occurred whatever. Even, he went as usual to the *H.P.* office, and was always under the impression afterwards that he had done some work. Jessop, in one of his rare fits of geniality, inquired whether he would accompany him to a music-hall in the evening. It was amusing, and Frank laughed. To a music-hall, when Olympus was waiting for him!

He answered with hysterical gaiety that he had an engagement.

And the sun sank ; and they began to light the street lamps ! How many hours still before he could send for the hansom ? The thought of dinner sickened him ; he had nothing to do but smoke and eat cachoux to take the odour away, and smoke, and eat more cachoux. Chrissie was out, and he sat over the fire—there was already a touch of winter in the air—in excited reverie. Had the man shaved him properly ? Was his “buttonhole,” after all, the best selection he might have made ? Was Dolly looking forward at this moment as eagerly as *he* was ? He tugged out his watch again—only eight o'clock ! This day was an eternity.

How delightfully the breeze blew after his heated toilet as the cab sped over the frosty asphalte ! Something was wrong with his throat, and his heart thumped distressingly.

He was afraid he must look ill, and he certainly felt so. A last cigarette to steady him—no, the cachoux were at home! A liqueur of brandy, then? It might heat him more, but, on the other hand, what was the use of presenting himself at the house speechless! He directed the driver to stop at the first decent bar, and re-entered the cab with his nerves less insolent.

An awning, and a gathering of dirty boys, who commented on the “torff” as he trod the drugget. Footmen with twinkling stockings inside the doors; a perspective of faces, and of gleaming shoulders, and the scent of flowers on the staircase. The strains of music—he was there! He drew a deep breath, and sought his hostess.

He saw Miss Benson a little later. What did she wear?—he did not know; but it was the palest heliotrope, and there were pearls round her throat. He stood before her daunted

—appalled by the audacity of his own imaginings. Her queenliness shook him. Could she be for him, this “daughter of the gods,” or was he mad?

It happened after supper. He had danced with her twice and with others—ghostly creatures that he could not remember—when at length he led her away from the crowd. The valse-tune that was still in progress followed him faintly, mingled with the tinkle of rose-water, where a miniature fountain gushed from the tessellated floor. She had said she was warm, thirsty, tired (goodness knows what!), and he found her a seat under the gigantic palms. Then he raised his eyes, and adored her. Hers were brilliant with coquetry, as the lassitude passed, and she read in his look what he did not attempt to hide.

“What a shame!” she murmured.

“A shame?”

"To take you away from the room like this !
Are you sorry ?"

Why could he not say at once that he was rapturous ! The words would not come ; he could only stammer a stupid deprecation.

"You know," he said, huskily, "you know I am not sorry ! Don't fan yourself—let me do it."

She gave him the fan ; it remained attached by a ribbon to her waist, and he perforce leant nearer to her. Her lids closed languidly, and her lashes were bewitching.

"It is delicious," she said.

"Is it hard enough ?"

"Yes, quite."

He bent lower ; so low that when her eyes reopened suddenly it staggered him.

"Are you tired ?" she asked.

"'Tired !'" He could have fanned her so for ever.

"But you stopped ?"

"Yes ; because you looked at me."

How much can be said with a low laugh !

"I must not look at you, Mr. Heath ?"

The thumping heart rose into his mouth.

"Do," he gasped, "look, and—and listen, too. I have been counting the hours to this dance ; I have thought of nothing but you since the night you gave me the flower. I love you ! Miss Benson, I worship you ! Oh, Dolly, Dolly, say you care for me a little, or I shall wish myself dead !"

She did not answer. He lifted her hand, and kissed it through the glove.

"Speak to me," he begged.

"Why are you so silly ?" she asked.

"To love you ! Is that silly ?"

"But so much. Poor little *me* !"

"You are an angel. Everyone must love you. Didn't you know ?"

"I fancied sometimes—never mind !"

"Ah, tell me !"

"I fancied sometimes that you liked me a tiny bit. Only I wasn't sure."

"And were you sorry?"

She shook her head.

"Dolly! were you glad?"

"Why do you want me to say?"

"Dolly! were you glad?"

"Perhaps," she whispered; "just a scrap."

The palms hid them, and he stooped till their lips met. The music sang in his ears, and the lamps danced.

"Darling," he exclaimed, "my wife to be! Oh, Dolly! I came here this evening meaning to say it all; and when I saw you dressed like this, I thought I'd never have the pluck!"

"Did you?" she said, timidly; "do you know that when I put it on, I rather hoped you'd think I looked nice!"

The palms hid them again; the valse had ended, and intruders entered. But still they

sat there, watching through the glass the effulgent moon, that was not brighter than their dream; asking "When did you first?" and "Did you then?" and "Swear that you will always, dear!"

CHAPTER XIV.

IT was broad daylight when he left the house, and to go to bed was out of the question. He let himself quietly into the lodgings, and changed his clothes, and strolled, in the stillness of the early morning, to the Heath. The tenderness of the hour, the innocence and hush, harmonized with his new-found peacefulness of mind. He was engaged! The breeze murmured "Dolly" among the tree-tops; the sleeping ponds he gazed at showed him back the depths of "Dolly's" eyes. Only last night? It seemed a week ago! But he was engaged!

At the "Bull and Bush" he had some coffee, and, remembering that Christabel would be stirring now, he bent his steps towards home.

She was in the dining-room when he entered it; the servant was laying the breakfast cloth.

"You have been out—so early?"

"I got back so late; it wasn't worth while to sleep."

He could hardly contain himself till the door had closed, and they were alone. Then his great news burst from him in a rush, and there ensued a cross-fire of interrogatories and replies.

"When shall you speak to Mr. Benson?"

"This evening. She is to prepare him first."

"He won't make objections, will he? Or do you fear—"

"She is certain he will consent. He has never refused her anything in her life, nor has her mother."

"Oh, Frank, how glad I am! When shall I know her?"

"Directly—in a day or so. ' She is awfully anxious to see you, and Marion too. Chrissie, she is an angel!"

"Dear boy!"

He went to town in a dream. The most familiar objects seemed strange to him to-day, and the sight of the papers he had folded away on quitting his desk last evening emphasized to his brain the astonishing event that had happened since. Towards afternoon an access of nervousness seized him. What if her father were less complaisant than they hoped, and dismissed his suit with scorn? The magnitude of the petition he had to submit suddenly overwhelmed him, and the prospects he had to dwell upon shrank till his teeth chattered. Mr. Benson appeared newly formidable—an opulent stranger of commercial principles, to whom he was about to sue insanely for a price.

less gift. It had been arranged that he should call at the house at nine o'clock ; and a longing that it were now ten consumed his very soul.

The afternoon wore away as slowly as it had done the day before, but this evening he did not return to Hampstead on leaving the office. He betook himself to Great Portland Street, where, on a pretence of dining, he moistened his eloquence with a small bottle of champagne and a curaçoa-and-cognac. This brought him to seven o'clock, and, fearful that meditation would only increase his terrors, he retraced his steps, and turned in for an hour at the nearest music hall. It was the first time he had been in it since it had re-opened after alterations, and the changes that he noted, and the lights, and the crowd, served to divert his thoughts a trifle from the ordeal in store for him.

He took his departure—to the disgust of two of her adorers, whom he was compelled to disturb—as the advent of a favourite serio-comic

was being greeted with cheers and applause, and proceeded to Portman Square without suffering himself to anticipate. Mr. Benson was in the library, he learnt ; would he " kindly step this way, sir ? "

He entered with trepidation.

" Good evening, Mr. Heath."

" Good evening, Mr. Benson. I—er—it is very kind of you to give me this opportunity of speaking to you."

" Not at all ; take a seat. I was warned by my daughter that you would call." But his manner was not too promising.

Frank sat down and played with his hat ; and the elder man swung round in his revolving chair, crossing his legs, and tapping his fingers together.

" Now, what is all this nonsense that I hear, Mr. Heath ? " he inquired, stiffly. " What is it you have been saying to my daughter ? "

" I have told Miss Benson that I love her, sir, and I have asked her to be my wife."

"Humph, a plain answer to a plain question ! And I understand that she is as big a fool as you are ?"

Frank did not reply, and the other repeated his unflattering query : " I understand my daughter is as big a fool as you are, eh ? "

" You may even think her a bigger one," said Frank, plucking up his courage, " for *I* love Miss Benson, and Miss Benson loves *me*."

The publisher broke into a chuckle, and the severity of his countenance disappeared with bewildering abruptness.

" Have a cigar, my boy," he said ; " we shall chat more comfortably if we smoke. Come, light up ! Now look here, Heath, I'll tell you at once that I am not angry ; I was only fooling you ! I believe in your talent, and I'm confident you have a successful future in front of you. I believe in your affection for Dolly, too—"

Frank interrupted him with protestations.

"Yes, quite so ; you'd ' die for her,' I know ! You are fond of her, and she's fond of you ; and, what's not a little to the purpose, you are a great favourite of my wife's."

" My dear sir !—"

" You *are*. Mrs. Benson and I both like you very much. Well, we shan't stand in your way ; and there you have it in a nutshell."

" I can't tell you," stammered Frank, his face flushing, " how deeply I appreciate your kindness. I know that at present my position does not justify my pretensions, but in a little time I hope—"

Mr. Benson cut him short.

" That brings me to another point," he said. " I don't know what you are making at the present stage, but I don't think it need trouble us. Dolly has made up her mind to have you, and, since that's the case, it seems to me you may just as well marry each other now as leave her to sigh her heart out for another five or

ten years, waiting while you patch up an income. However, the date is a matter that you must settle with *her*! Confess you shook in your shoes when you came in. She made me promise not to keep you in suspense long, but the temptation to frighten you just for a minute was enormous."

Playful old gentleman! But who would fail to be grateful for a father-in-law like this! Not Frank, at all events, and the interview that had proceeded so pleasantly would have been extended longer than it was, but for the intimation that Dolly was waiting for him, and that there was nobody with her.

"I don't think the child has done so badly for herself," Benson assured him, following him to the door, "and you may tell her from me that her father is satisfied with her choice."

Her lover told her that and many other things before he left, with the understanding that he was to dine there on the following

evening ; and the delighted Chrissie's congratulations an hour or two later, when she heard the tidings, were redoubled.

"It is wonderful !" she exclaimed. "Oh, Frank, who could have dreamed of this when you were writing 'The Career' ? First the triumph of it, and then that you would marry your publisher's daughter !"

"And Marion," he said—"Marion, a fashionable woman, with a house in South Street ! No, it is marvellous indeed. You are the only one that the fickle goddess has neglected up to the present, poor little Chris."

"'Neglected !'" she returned, brightly ; "I've got my Edgar ! and I'm richer than the two of you put together. Besides, you wait ; he will be a great man one of these days, and all London will flock to hear him preach !"

And, though she was as unsuspicious of its approach as ever, Fortune was very near her now. When Mrs. Bouverie came in from her

drive the next day, and the servant brought her the letters that had been delivered during her absence, there was one among them which caused her to utter a little cry of joy. It told her that the failure which had begun to threaten her last pet scheme was averted, and that it had ended well—nay, more brilliantly than for some time she had allowed herself to expect. The note which excited her so ran thus :—

“MY DEAR MRS. BOUVERIE,—I yesterday received some news that may interest you. The death of the Incumbent I mentioned in our recent conversation leaves the living of Lauriston once more vacant. Need I say that it will delight me to nominate your friend’s *fiancé*, if you wish it? Trusting I may now be written down the ‘nicest man you know,’ and with kindest regards, believe me,

“Yours very faithfully,

“WHICHELO.”

The living, of all livings that she had desired,

was obtained! Constance ran to her *escritoire* and scribbled two little missives without a moment's delay—one to Lord Whichelo, thanking him enthusiastically for his remembrance of her request, and the other to Christabel, informing her of what was done. She had scarcely finished the latter when the footman announced Mr. Heath. She rose, welcoming him radiantly.

"You find me in the best of spirits," she said.
"I have just had a piece of lovely news!"

"News?"

"Yes, see!" and she showed him the letter that had come; "I wanted to do what I could for Mr. Stirling, and 'Lauriston' is a perfect dream. The stipend, too, is something like twelve hundred a year. Oh, I can't say how pleased I am."

"Mrs. Bouverie! You are a beneficent fairy, I truly believe."

She laughed merrily.

"I think Chrissie will be glad," she said ; "I have just written to tell her about it. Well, sit down by the fire ; it doesn't necessitate our standing, does it ? And what have you been doing with yourself ?"

He paused an instant.

"It was about myself I came to speak," he acknowledged, hesitatingly ; "perhaps you will be surprised, but I wished you to be among the first to know—I am engaged."

"You are going to be married ?"

"Yes—to Miss Benson."

"I congratulate you with all my heart."

The fire was low—low like her voice—and momentarily she stooped to warm her hands. It did not occur to him, but they were in the room where he had begged her to be his wife ; then, as now, she had just returned from her drive. The setting of the scene was the same.

"I congratulate you with all my heart," she repeated, steadily ; "when is it to be ?"

"Soon, I think. There is no opposition from her family, and we are very much in love. I want you to meet her, Mrs. Bouverie. I am sure you will like her when you do."

"I look forward to it. So you are going to be married, Frank, and Chrissie too? It is very nice that it happens together."

"Isn't it?" he agreed; "jolly!"

There were tears in her voice, but he did not hear them; tears in her eyes, but he saw only the rose-colour of his own dreams. His embarrassment vanished, and he dilated to her upon the girl's perfections, and on the "undeserved happiness" that had befallen him, until it was time for him to take his leave.

His anxieties lay behind him, and before him stretched the highway of success. His feet had touched it, and the future held nothing he need fear. He dressed and drove to the Square to dinner. Dolly was in the drawing-room alone, and he reported to her tenderly the incidents of

his day. Her cheek rested on his shoulder, and she painted in ten minutes glowing pictures of the life that lay in store for them. He would write charming books, and their house would be sought by the most brilliant people in town, and papa had promised her a carriage the very first year—was it not splendid? He signified approval, and, tightening his clasp about her waist, felt that fate could have no more to grant. His cup was full, and in the exultance that possessed him he laughed aloud.

But Mrs. Bouverie still sat motionless before the dying fire, her head sunk upon her breast.

THE END.





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